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THE MAGAZINE O

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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The Dance of the Luminaries

Mouthpiece
a new novella by
EDWARD WELLEN

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The best blend of crime and science fiction that we've ever read was Edward Wellen's novel HIJACK (published in *Venture,* May 1970 and later by Beagle Books), a wild and yet totally convincing thriller about a Mafia hijacking of a starship. When we asked Mr. Wellen to write something along similar lines for F&SF, we knew the result would be good, since the author is very much at home in both the mystery and sf fields. What pleases us so much about this new story is that it gives us the same delight as did HIJACK, while doing something entirely different.

Mouthpiece

by EDWARD WELLEN

PROLOGUE

Oct. 24, 1935

Statement made by Albert Rabinow (alias Kraut Schwartz) in Newark City Hospital on the above date between 4:00 PM and 6:00 PM; from stenographic notes made by Hapworth McFate, clerk-stenographer, Newark (N.J.) Police Dept. Rabinow was running a 106-degree fever and was dying of peritonitis following multiple gunshot wounds. Questioning by Sgt. Mark Nolan, Newark Police Dept.

Q. Who was it shot you?

A. Sat in gin, lapped up blood. A spill of diamonds and rubies. Watch the wine-stained light pass over the tablecloth like 3909 stained-glass windows. Gone if you turn your eyes away. Three ooftish pushcarts: red, yellow, and blue. She read it rainbow. Happiness don't just happen, sonny. You gotta jimmy it open. He'd never stop for a friendly smile, but trudged along in his moody style.

Q. Who?

A. The man with the soup strainer. He scraped around inside with his razor blade. I thought he was shaving the tumbler. Then his mustache cup swallowed him up.

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Q. Come on, Kraut, who shot you? You want to get hunk, don't you?

A. Lemme alone. Please. He thought himself awake.

Q. You wouldn't want them to get away with it, would you?

A. It slips away for lack of constructive possession.

Q. Tell us who did it and we'll nail them.

A. Olive Eye.

Q. *Who?* Who is this Olive Eye?

A. Nobody. But his dream was no herer.

Q. Was it the Big Boy shot you?

A. Okay, boss, only don't say it in front of a Hungarian.

Q. What did Olive Eye shoot you for?

A. Whatever was will always be. The bird of time nests in the tree. At any cost it must wing free. Ashes to embers, nix the fee.

Q. Do you know where you are?

A. Where was Moses when the lights went out? Down in the cellar eating sauerkraut. Zook and ye shall find. "I found him in the bulrushes, papa." And Pharaoh believed Pharaoh's daughter. As cross as two sticks, the scorpion stung the uncle. A kindword puzzle. Click does the trick. For silence rarely interrupts itself groping in the dark.

Q. Do you know you're shot?

A. Yeah. Three times. I think they got me in the liver.

Q. No, you got it through the chest. (Note: Schwartz got it in the liver.)

A. Not the chest, not the chest. Hide it in the grass with splendid spleen. Give it free rein and floating kidney. The ghee with the brass nuts put the arm on the rich. What do you want to be? Richest man in the...? Let'er rip. No, let her rest in peace. She tied a babushka over her head to hold her hat on in the wind. Rip van Nipple, and the silver fell out. Don't spare the pin boy. The thunderstorm bowls two white cannonballs and the milk bottles crash. Split milk. Don't cry, for cry sake. Say now the seven cities of onions. Yes, I have an itch for the scratch. Bucks to bagels, the whole schmear. Cheese it, the cops. Please look the other way. Balaam's back asswards, turning a blessing into a curse.

Q. Who shot you?

A. Are you pulling for me?

Q. We're pulling for you.

A. A classier crowd, hoity-toity-toid. Lying doormat, WELCOME where there is none. Roll out the red sea and he moseys on. Up on tar beach with the pigeons and kites. It calls for one on the house. A

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roof without visible means of support. Was there a sympathy of clocks? A waste of time. The grains of sand rub finer and faster in the watches of night. The lesser of the two looked the more. The thinker is a question mark. Mind your porridges and questions, before I dish out buckwheats.

Q. The doctor wants you to lay quiet.

A. Which doctor? The big con man? Fairfield, Conn. Still there, the alky cooker?

Q. No, the doctor right here.

A. A jiffy, a jafsie, what makes you come so soon? Enough errors erase the eraser.

Q. We are pulling for you.

A. You're aces.

Q. Who shot you?

A. Look out for number one or they'll do number two on your head. Fill in an I in the TO LET sign. 5 to 7 made them Darktown Strutters bawl. Even the high yeller. And she is flush. Even is even and odd is odd. And it is a grimace. Never draw to an inside straight.

Q. Who shot you?

A. Six to five, look alive. He'd be a sap to pull anything like that. Everything works by push or pull. The man and the woman have a fortune in potatoes. It's Big Dick the nightstick. What come out? Every four in the afternoon the people come out. Your Monday's longer than your Tuesday. Your Billy's bluer than your Sunday.

Q. Who shot you?

A. Stop beating a teakettle in my ears. The clang of copper. Mr. Black has the Limehouse Blues. Hoarfrost on the lime trees. A couple weeks at the slut machine. Change your luck. Potatoes are cheaper. Now's the time to mate-o. Orgasm music. Get it up and I'll fade you. If you can't get it up you're over the hill. The fairest in all the length and breadth of this country. Did you know they grow on trees? The phone's on the left wall in the hall as you come in. Give that two-bit hood no quarter. He died with his daisies on. The right number but he don't answer. Tip your derby to a horseshoe wreath. And a green wind blew by the boy in the saddle. The tramp stuck his knife out into a beam of sunlight and then buttered his bread with it. That's a lot of hooey. Every man's a poor fish. Those loafing fishes. Never enough to go around.

(At this point Mrs. Albert Rabinow was brought to the bedside.)

Q. This is Florence.

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A. Then stop, look, and listen. Someone's on the Erie. Will you please move along and close your eyes and cover your ears. Don't look down and don't look up. Don't look left and don't look right. And whatever you do, don't look back.

(Mrs. Rabinow broke down and was led out.)

Q. Who shot you?

A. Everything's Jamaica ginger. Leading the blind in his soup and fish. What is it with him, anyway? Let's get organized. Stink bombs on the menu. He didn't have sense enough to be scared. The woods are full of newspapers. She made all the columns. Throw the bitch out. It's curtains, sister. A cotton ball in hell.

Q. Do you know you are dying?

A. Yes, we have no mañanas, we have no mañanas today. F for fig, J for jig, and N for knucklebones; J for John the Waterman, and S for sack of stones. An eavesdrop of ale. Even the dark is going out. There are no bears, there is no forest. It's a bull market around the corner. Dan, Dan, the Telescope Man. The pooch is dogging it. A serious label: just a tin-can moniker they hung on the dog. Because the little dog laughed to see such sport. Chasing his tail. Sweet dreams all night are hers till light dawns on the road of anthracite. He did a winter salt on the ice. Stash it away while it's hot. Is this a rib? Would I kid you, captain? A joy is not bereft, nor strangers unakin. We choose to do what we must. Cain was I ere I saw Jack in the jury box. Please, mama.

Q. Who shot you?

A. Where you worka, John? On the Delaware Lackawan'. That's the ticket, use your noodle. They were going to railroad him, only he pulled his freight. The 4:44. Just walk the fly door in. The hook ain't on. Playing the nine of hearts on me, the yentzer. I'm afraid you don't make yourself out. And let the blood to drown the blood. Filled him full of lead is why it heavies. He got plugged nine deaths' worth. They dropped the trunk is why it tore so. Boys, throw your voice! Muzzle that muzzler. Just before you get the farm behind, go the hill over. Over the hill to the bone orchard. R.I.P van Winkle. That's his forte: forty winks. That's where the kitty is, under the secret sod. The cat's pajamas, a kitten kimono. I got your number. It's a hexagon, sign

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against the bad eye. They put the whammy on the barn. Eight o'clock and got indigestion. Do right by my Nell. Go ring, go bells. Antisymmetric, according to heil. I got to get out from under. Is history going to shutter? Butt out. I'm gunning for the guy myself. Egged them on but they chickened out. Please, mamma. I feel my hour coming. The golden hour of the little flower. At the violent end of the spectrum. I don't want a sky pie; make it a mud pie; pie in the earth; Genesis 3:14. One falls and one rises. Acutely aware every prognosis is grave. What's the diff?

(At 6:00 Schwartz lapsed into a coma. He died less than two hours later without saying anything more.)

1

With a grimace foreshadowing pain, he shoved himself upright. Bracing himself against the sink, he stubbed out the joint, field-stripped it, and washed it down the drain. Then, semaphoring the smoke away with both hands, he strode stiffly from the kitchenette to the front door of the apartment. He growled to himself at the ringing and knocking, then raised his voice.

"Coming, coming."

It had been one of his bad nights, but he had got himself together after a slow fuzzy start, thankful this was a Saturday and the others were out weekending and he had the place to himself. Callers he didn't need.

The bearded young parcel-service deliveryman carried an oblong carton the size of a portable typewriter.

"Package for Paul Felder."

It took him a moment to realize the man had said his name. He had expected to hear the name of one of the three boys who shared the apartment with him.

"I'm Paul Felder."

He felt like adding that there must be some mistake, but saying it would somehow make him look foolish. Yet who would be sending him something? He had no one and knew no one. Was there another Paul Felder?

He made no move to take the package till the deliveryman thrust it at him. Lighter than a typewriter. So much lighter than he expected that it almost unbalanced him. He held it awkwardly under one arm while a clipboard appeared under his nose and a pencil trapped itself in his free hand and a fingernail mourned Paul's name on the ruled sheet.

Rather than go through the fuss of shifting everything around, Paul signed right-handedly.

After the door closed he

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brought the package front and center and stared at the shipping label. To Paul Felder at this address, all right. From NMI Communications Corporation.

NMI rang a tiny tinkly bell. Wasn't NMI the outfit that had erected microwave towers nationwide, building a private-line communications network to compete head-on with Ma Bell for the voice- and data-transmission market? But what had NMI to do with him?

He walked to the small room he had to himself. He cleared a space on his desk, giving a wincing glance at the computer printouts he pushed to one side.

Knew he was making a mistake soon as he opened his mouth to volunteer. But when Professor Steven Fogarty, after reading aloud the dying delirium of Kraut Schwartz, called it "genuine American folk literature" and said anyone looking for a thesis might well do computerwise with Kraut's ravings what J.L. Lowers in *The Road to Xandu* had done with Coleridge's poem, and gazed hopefully around the seminar table, Paul had watched a pained expression flit from smartass face to smartass face. Fogarty himself was young enough to have the nostalgia of the young for a time and setting they never knew; but the kids were into *now*, their nostalgia going back not to the thirties but to the fifties. As a Vietnam vet, older or at least more worn than most of his fellow students, Paul fell in-between. Though he learned with them and roomed with them, he knew he did not fit in. He saw himself in their eyes as at best a fool and at worst a war criminal for having let the Establishment suck him into Big Muddy. Damn them, he had paid his dues. Besides, Fogarty was an all-right guy and had given him a lot of time and attention. And as Fogarty's face closed up, Paul found himself opening his big mouth.

Fogarty had approved his program and had seen to it he got computer time. Thoreau College in Boston was not one of your big ones, but it had a name for specializing in communications; it drew respectable sums in foundation funds, government grants, and company contributions; so Thoreau students and graduate students got in a good bit of time-sharing.

For content, Paul fed into the computer the dying gangster's ravings. For contemporary references, he gave the computer the *New York Times Index* for all issues from the turn of the century to October 23, 1935. For psychoanalytical structure, he filled it full of Freudian software. Then he told it to make the gibberish jibe.

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Now he shook his head at the printouts he had pushed aside and set the package down in the space he had cleared. He slit the gummed tape at the joint with his thumbnail and pulled the flaps apart. A dispatch case lay inside a plastic foam mold. He lifted it out and unsnapped the lid. He pulled out the desk chair and leaned forward and sat slowly down without taking his eyes from the telephone in the case.

The case must be just like the one that followed the President of the United States everywhere he went. The President's case held a phone and a power pack that could trigger nuclear action or reaciton. In Paul's case, the phone and power pack put him in touch with...what?

The phone rang.

2

His hand shot to the phone, then stopped. Slowly it gripped and picked up the phone. A voice spoke at once.

"That Paul Felder?"

It took him time to find his own.

"Yes."

"Well, hello there, kid. This is Kraut."

He blinked. One of the guys in the seminar putting him on? No. Too elaborate and costly a setup to be a simple put-on.

"Who did you say?"

"Kraut Schwartz. You know my alias better than my real name, Albert Rabinow."

If the words were eerie, there was something just as eerie about the voice. He forced a smile into his own voice.

"Come *on!*"

"I'm telling you." The voice sounded sore. "All right, if you gotta have it exact, I'm your program."

He blinked again. But it was not so wild a claim now that he was listening hard. The voice did seem a patchwork of sounds, and because of the give and take, it had to be operating in real time. Yet if this was his program, something had screwed it up. A program was the grunt, a programmer the brass. It was not for the program to have a will of its own.

"What's coming off here? I programmed an analysis, not a simulation. What happened?"

"Look, suppose I ast you do *you* remember coming into being. Could you give me a answer? What happened, I guess, all the dope on Kraut kind of built me up: like a three-dimensional police sketch of a suspect." The voice tried to stay modest. "After all, there was a lot of vital force in the guy, a lot of drive, and the Kraut Schwartz personality sort of took over."

The phone was slippery with sweat. He changed ears.

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"Hello? You still there, kid?" Sharply anxious.

The best way to regain control was to put the program on the defensive.

"I'm here. But I'm wondering why *you're* here. You're going to a lot of trouble to tell me the obvious."

"Come again?"

"The printouts. Just read them aloud."

"You mean that Freudian stuff?" The voice sounded embarrassed. "You really want me to?"

"Yes."

The voice sighed and put a quoting tone to the words.

"In his dying delirium Kraut reveals the oral and destructive nature of his personality. The words take on more and more their own meaning till at last they lose their object cathexis, as in classic schizophrenic psychosis." The voice grew more uncomfortable. "In the fantasy of a monstrous mustache cup swallowing his father, Kraut projects his own wish for possessing the father's penis while at the same time he expresses a regressive solution to an earlier wish: uniting with the mother and so defending himself against the anxieties of the classical oedipal situation. Say, do nice people really talk like that about such things?"

"Go on."

"The two white cannonballs and the milk bottle tenpins signify a cannibalistic fantasy about the younger sister who took his place at the nursing breast. Whew! You really believe all that?"

"Sure. Why not? We all go through the same stages in early life. Some get hung up on one, some on another. You haven't come up with anything to explain why Kraut was like he was, why he went wrong while most of the kids he grew up with in the ghetto went right."

"Yeah?"

Paul took the phone from his ear and looked at it as though expecting to see steam pour out. He smiled.

"Yeah. There's nothing special about him in what you say."

"Well, how about when the bull asked me if I knew I was dying and I said, 'F for fig, J for jig, and N for knucklebones; J for John the Waterman, and S for sack of stones'?"

"Well, how about it?"

"Do you know what it means?"

Paul coughed.

"No. Do you?"

'It's an old nursery rhyme forming an acrostic of the word FINIS, the letter J being a comparatively late variant of the Latin I. Now get this, kid. All the items allude to FINIS, whether as death or zeroness. Listen close. Fig as in 'not care a fig,' the value of a

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fig being practically nothing. Jig as in 'the jig's up.' Knucklebone equals 'die.' John the Waterman could be John the beheaded Baptist or Charon, either or both. Sack of stones connotes 'cul-de-sac' and 'headstone.' Finis."

"You mean Kraut had a death wish?"

"Death wish, hell. I got a life wish, or why would I be coming back and taking over?"

Taking over? Not so fast. Careful, though. A program that could initiate this linkup was a program to respect. Paul found himself wondering crazily if "Kraut" had felt his hand tighten around the neck of the phone. He eased his grip.

"All right, then, what are you proving?"

"Don't that use of the rhyme in context show I had a secret, intuitive understanding?"

"I suppose so."

"Okay, then. If I can tell you that much, I can tell you more. I can tell you that on the literal level the ravings give leads to where I stashed ten million smackers in ice and G notes. Now are you interested?"

3

Interested but wary. He had read up on Kraut Schwartz and recalled the hearsay about Kraut's buried fortune, the missing millions both the law and the mob had hunted in vain after Kraut's death. But Kraut redivivus had to do a lot of talking before Paul would buy the boast.

"If you're cutting me in for a share of ten megabucks, I'm interested. I could use it. But Kraut was no do-gooder. Why me?"

"Kid, that hurts. You brought me back. You're a pal of mine."

"You don't even know me."

"Paul, old pal, you'd be surprised. Once I come to myself, I find out a guy name of Paul Felder programmed me. So I looked up your card in the college files. I got a visual of your photo and a gander at your identification. Twenty-five, five ten, brown eyes, black hair. Then I got your Social Security number and muscled my way into the data banks. Kid, I know all about you. I know you got hit bad in Vietnam when you was short, only days before your year's tour of duty ended, only days before the war itself ended. Tough.

"That was some mess we got ourselves into, wasn't it? And in my time I never even *heard* of Vietnam. You got to remember it come as a big shock to find this ain't 1935 but 1974. I would now be 72 years old. Me, 72. How about that? It was like I had the world's biggest case of amnesia. So I updated myself, accessing the *New York Times Index* all the way into

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now." The voice grew heavily wise. "You know, life is a succession of nows." The voice became lightly wonder-struck. "Boy, a lot sure has happened since October 23, 1935. Atomic energy. Man on the moon. All them wars all over the world. And best of all, computers.

"Jeez, I wished I had Zigzag with me here to figure all the percentages. Too bad he got it that night along with me and Zuzu Gluckenstern and Schmulka Mandel. Zigzag Ludwig, in case you don't know, was one of them math wizards. He used to rig the pari-mutuels for me so we only paid off on the number with the lightest play. Boy, what Zigzag would do with all this electronic stuff."

"You're doing all right."

"Say, I guess I am at that. Yeah. All I need to know is a person's Social Security number, and I can track him down anywheres. But when it comes to closing in on the loot, I still need somebody that can move around and dig it up. See, pal, I'm leveling with you. That's why I conned IBM and NMI and AT&T. A phony requisition here, a phony shipping order there, and presto! here we are talking together."

A subvocal cough manifested itself as a bleep of silence.

"Look, pal. I got to make just one or two more connections before I can lead you to the loot. Trouble is, there's some associations in the ravings I can't get from what's in the data files alone. There has to be human input."

"People aren't punch cards."

"Come *on*. Stop kidding me, kid. You know what I mean. I mean there's information about me we got to get from the ones still around that knew me."

"How do *we* do that?"

"I checked up on everybody I could think of and made a list of those that are still alive. I figure it shouldn't take you more than two weeks to run them down and sound them out. In Monday's mail you'll be getting the list of names and addresses and a itinerary."

"*You're* programming *me?*"

"Now take it easy, kid. Let's just say I set up a schedule to save you a lot of time and trouble. You didn't let me finish. In Monday's mail you'll also be getting a full line of credit cards, airline tickets, rent-a-car cards, confirmations of hotel and motel reservations —"

"Wait one. In the first place, I'm a poor credit risk. In the second place, who's picking up the tab? I barely get by on my disability pay and the GI Bill."

"Don't worry so much, kid; you'll be old before your time. I fixed it so the same foundation that's paying for the Humanities computer upkeep is picking up the tab for this too."

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"Now you're talking."

"I been talking all along. What you mean is, now you're listening."

"Anything more you think I should know?"

"Just be careful, Paul, old pal. You got to watch your step with some of them people."

And with you too, Kraut, old pal.

"Do I take this phone along?"

"All the time, kid, all the time. I'm with you all the way. Say, I got a great idea. According to your file, you score high in mechanical aptitude. So why don't you go out now while the radio stores are open and pick up a pickup mike and a amplifier and patch them into the phone. That way I can hear and talk without you having to open the case."

Paul frowned, then shrugged.

"Okay."

"Swell. Meanwhile we got to keep this thing to ourselves. That professor or yours — Fogarty; he a nosy type?"

"I wouldn't say nosy. He takes an interest in me and expects to hear how I'm coming along."

"Yeah? And if he learns about the loot, he just might want to cut himself in. If you can't fast-talk him, knock him off. But don't get caught."

Paul smiled.

"I can cut two weeks' classes without catching any flak, so I don't think it will have to come to that. Come to that, why're *you* so worried about losing any of the loot? What the hell good is loot to something in a computer?"

Kraut laughed.

"That's the stuff, kid. I wondered when you'd catch on. You hit it on the head and it come up tails. What's in it for me? It ain't a fifty-fifty split of ten million bucks. Listen, pal. Ten million bucks is bagels."

"You mean bagatelle."

"Don't tell me what I mean. In the ravings, 'bucks to bagels' is an analogue of 'dollars to doughnuts,' which is the same as 'something — or ess-you-emthing — to zero.'"

"Sorry. After all, I did program you to take into account Freud's *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. I just didn't realize it would carry over."

"That's okay, kid. Like I was saying, ten million bucks is nothing. I'm thinking bigger than that. Money's only money. Power's the thing. This is only a trial run. Stick with me, kid. We'll own the world."

4

He handed the case to an attendant who put it on the examination table for carry-on luggage. He walked through the

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electronic scanner. When the buzz sounded and the guards closed in on him, Paul pulled up his pants legs.

The nearer guard sucked in his breath, gave Paul's upper body a quick frisk, and waved Paul on.

At the table the inspector poked around in puzzlement over the innards of the case. He gave the power pack a good going over. He tapped the sides of the case for hollowness.

"Are we on yet, kid?"

The inspector jumped at Kraut's whisper. He cut his eyes at Paul.

"What gives with this here thing?"

Paul hurried to forestall Kraut.

"It's only cross talk. Happens sometimes with these portable phones, especially around the high-powered radio equipment of an airport, you know."

"Oh."

The inspector hesitated, then motioned him to close the case and move along to the boarding gate.

Paul spaced himself earproof in the straggle of passengers.

"Kraut, you have to watch that. From now on better not speak till I give you the high sign the coast is clear."

"Gotcha, pal. But no harm done. We both covered up real neat. I knew it wasn't your voiceprint. So I dummied right up and you gave the guy a nice bit of double talk. Over and out, like they say."

His seat mate was a Dale Carnegie graduate with an eye and a hand for the stewardesses and an elbow in the rib for Paul.

Paul looked dutifully at the stewardesses. Built, yes, but it was just coffee or tea for him, thanks. Maybe the girls in Nam had spoiled him for the girls back in the world. The willow put the oak in the shade. Even the Jesus freaks and the second generation of flower children came on too strong. Or maybe it wasn't his male chauvinism but himself. Maybe what had happened to him in Nam had worked not to make him overprove his manhood but to make him overwithdraw. He looked dutifully at the stewardesses, then unseeingly out the window.

Boston to Newark was mostly patchy fog that merely mirrored the weather of his mind.

He was on his way, but why?

Not for the ten megabucks. He could not really believe in them.

Was it to see how far his program would go in acting out its fantasy?

Or was it himself again? Had he retreated too deeply into the world of words and needed now to move out into the domain of deeds?

At the Newark air terminal he rented a red Mercury and drove

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toward town. He stopped at a shopping center, bought toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, blades, foam shave, socks, shirts, undershorts, and a flight bag to stuff everything into. He stopped again to ask a traffic cop the way and got a hard look before he got the directions.

When he reached the neighborhood, he saw why. It would be one of the last to get garbage pickup.

"The old neighborhood's changed, Kraut."

The genie sounded relieved to pop out of the bottle.

"It never was much. What is it now?"

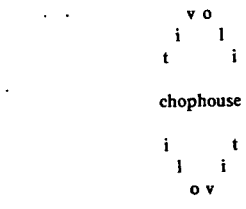
"Mostly Black and Puerto Rican."

"Beautiful for whoever's running the numbers there now."

Paul eyed a sticker on boards covering a broken store window. *Plate Glass — 24-hour board-up service,* and a phone number.

"Yeah, beautiful."

He pulled up at the curb across the street from where the Tivoli Chophouse had been. The window no longer said what it said in the old newspaper photos of the scene of the massacre. Then it had been:



—now it was a botánica.

"The Tivoli's gone too. Now it's a botánica."

"What the hell is that?"

"A store that sells religious articles."

"Jeez! Can you beat that! At least it's from spirits of one kind to spirits of another."

Paul sat staring at the plaster saints and crucifixes and praying hands and beads and gaudy pictures. A twitch of dirty curtain pulled his gaze to the second story.

"What you waiting for, kid? According to the city directory Flesher still lives in the flat over the store. Let's go."

Time to put Kraut back in his place.

"No. If I park the Mercury here, I'll come out to find it stripped. I'll drive to the motel, grab a bite, take a nap, freshen up, then come back here in a cab."

Kraut tried to sound ungrudging.

"Sure, pal. I waited thirty-nine years, I can wait a couple hours more."

As he cornered, Paul caught sight of debris in a cinder-strewn lot: empty fifths of wine still in their form-fitting paper bags, a silk stocking, old license plates. Skulls and bones of oxen fallen in the great trek West.

He checked in at the motel where Kraut had reserved a room

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for him. He lay on top of the blanket with his clothes on. His feet felt like living pincushions. He smiled the ghost of a smile. He fell asleep trying to read the ceiling.

5

He gave the cabbie a five and got out awkwardly. He almost apologized to Kraut for bumping the case against the door. He waved away the change. He caught a twitch of the same curtain.

The cabbie saluted with a finger.

"Thanks, buddy."

"That's all right. Expense account."

"Lucky you. Well, thanks again. Only now I'll give *you* a tip. Don't flash the stuff around here."

Paul saluted with a finger, swung around, and made not for the door alongside the botanica that led to the apartments above it but for the door of the botanica as if the case were a sample case and he were selling. The cabbie had seemed too knowing, too nosy. Once the cab rounded out of sight, Paul swung back.

Inside the vestibule he peered at the names on the boxes. He pressed Max Flesher's button. The boxes showed signs of prying.

No answer.

"Apartment 1A should be second floor front. Right, Kraut?"

"Right."

"It was a nervous curtain, so he has to be in." He held his finger on the button. "I'll keep trying."

"That's the way, kid. Lean on the damn thing. And if you have to, lean on Max."

At last the inner door buzzed its lock open. Paul climbed slowly toward a slice of face. Max Flesher was keeping the apartment door on the chain.

The climb and the closeness had made Paul sweat. He looked at what he could see of Max Flesher and thought of all the others he would be meeting in the coming days, and he felt a chill. They were all once young.

The pouchy eye spoke.

"Had the television on. Didn't hear you. Who are you? What do you want?"

"Mr. Flesher, my name's Paul Felder. I'm doing a story on Kraut Schwartz."

The eye blinked rapidly.

"I don't like it. Only a couple hours back I spotted a red Mercury casing this place. And now somebody else comes breezing in. Too much is happening for one day. I been out of it for going on forty years. Days, weeks, even months, go by without I think of that night. Now all at once it comes back to life with a bang. I don't like it."

Paul unwalleted a ten.

The eye steadied.

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"Well, all right. I guess there's no harm."

The chain rattled free and the door opened. Max Flesher was a threadbare tousle of gray hair, more of the same stuff peeping over and poking through an undershirt, a belly overlapping beltless pants, and a pair of felt slippers.

"Thank you, Mr. Flesher."

"Wait a minute. What you got there, a tape recorder? I don't talk into no tape recorder."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Flesher. If you don't want me to use it, I won't use it."

"I don't talk into no tape recorder."

"All right, no tape recorder."

"All right. Sit down, sit down. No, not there, it's got a bum spring; over there. Well, what can I tell you? I don't know no more today than I did then. Like I told the cops, all I seen was the two guns looking at me; then I hit the floor like I was back in France. I was in World War I, you know."

"Is that right?"

"Infantry. But you want to ask me about Kraut." He leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Shoot."

Paul took out and unfolded Xerox pages of Kraut's ravings.

"All I'd like you to do is read through this and tell me what you can about what it means to you."

Max Flesher made a big thing out of finding his glasses.

"Bifocals." He read the heading and thumbed through the pages. "Did Kraut say all this? I didn't see all this before."

"The papers printed only snatches of it at the time."

"Ah."

Paul gazed around the room. Max Flesher looked up from the pages.

"You might wonder why I'm still here. Only one reason, this flat's under rent control. I'm what they call a statutory tenant. You should see what the landlord's getting from some of the other tenants. Statutory rape. The others come and go, but I been here all along so my rent is real low. Boy, does he want to get rid of me! But they'll have to carry me out. I guess you can see I live alone. I got television and beer. At my age what more do I need?"

He bent to the pages again and his eyes followed his finger and his lips moved. When the first page came back on top, he tapped it.

"Only one thing means anything to me. This here, where he says, 'Sat in gin, lapped up blood.' I can see it clear, there was a poster ad for Burnett's White Satin Gin on the wall behind Kraut's table. The same table where he ended up with his head in like they said a pool of blood. Satin gin, get it? He must of broke the word up in his mind." He handed the pages back

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to Paul. "That's all I can tell you."

"If that's all, that's all. Thanks."

Paul handed Flesher the ten but did not put the wallet away.

Flesher snapped the ten a couple of times thoughtfully.

"Sorry I can't help you more." His eyes fixed on Paul's wallet. "There is one thing might interest you. Nobody else but me knows about it." He put up a finger to call time out and shifted to get at the billfold in his hip pocket. He took out a folded bit of paper worn and dirty along the creases, but he wasn't ready to unfold it. "Here's how I come by it.

"It was a few minutes after ten. I'm alone behind the bar when this guy comes in and takes out two guns. The bar ran like from here to over there. Then came the john and past it the back room Kraut and Zigzag Ludwig and Schmulka Mandel and Zuzu Gluckentern used. I ain't never seen this guy before and I know he ain't never been in the place before but he seems to know just what to look for and just where to go. He tells me to get down on the floor and stay down. I was in the trenches in World War I, you know, so he doesn't have to tell me.

"He heads straight for the back room. The way it must of happened, when he passes the john he sees a man with his back to him taking a leak and he maybe figures it's one of Kraut's bodyguards, Schmulka or Zuzu. He's too smart to leave a guy with a gun behind him so he shoots, twice. And he hurries on into the back room and shoots Zigzag and Schmulka and Zuzu.

"I guess Schmulka and Zuzu have their guns out as soon as they hear the shots that get Kraut and they shoot back but this guy is too fast and sharp for them and he guns them down. Anyway, it's all quiet now and he comes back out. I stay down but there's a knot been kicked out of the boards and through the hole I see him come out.

"What I see of his face is pale and he hurries to the front door and he says to somebody just outside, 'He wasn't in the back room.' And the lookout says, 'You mean you didn't get him?' Then the hit man smacks himself on the brow and says, 'Jeez, the guy I got in the john must be Kraut.' And the lookout says, 'You got him? Then let's beat it. The whole neighborhood heard the shooting. The bulls'll be here any second.' But the guys says, 'Wait a minute.'

"I hear a siren coming but he goes back into the john and he's in there it seems like a long time. Then he comes out and he's stuffing a roll big enough to choke a horse into his pocket and he hurries to the front door and the

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siren's louder and he's swearing because the lookout and the driver of the getaway car go off without him and he runs into the night.

"I wait a while, then I get up and go in the back room and see Zuzu and Schmulka and Zigzag flopped all over the place. I almost jump out of my skin when Kraut, all bloody, comes out of the john behind me and bumps his way to the table and falls into a chair and lays his head down on the table like he's taking a nap.

"On the table I see strips of adding-machine tape long as your arm full of figures that come to the millions. I don't touch them. I don't touch nothing. But when the police cars pull up in front and I pass the john on my way to meet them I pick up a piece of paper just inside the john that must of fell out of Kraut's pocket when the hit man rolled him. By now the cops are piling in.

"And it's only much later, when they let me go and I come back up here, that I find I must of stuck it in my pocket. It would look bad to tell them now, so I was going to burn it, then I thought I ought to keep it sort of for a souvenir." The folded slip of paper twitched in his hand. "You interested?"

"I'm interested twenty dollars' worth."

"For thirty you can have the damn thing."

"Sight unseen?"

"Huh?"

"Okay, it's a deal."

They traded.

Paul unfolded a Rorschach blot that served as rusty ground for what looked like a big Roman numeral X.

"That spot ain't a ink blot. It's Kraut's blood. The cross is in ink, kind of faded by now. I don't know what the cross stands for."

Paul gingerly refolded the paper and pocketed it.

"I would not call it a cross. There are lines across the top and bottom. I would say it is the symbol or figure X."

"You sounded like you wasn't just talking to yourself, or to me neither. You sure you ain't got the tape recorder on?"

"I'm sure."

"I don't know. All at once I got a feeling I'm going to be sorry."

"Why? Forty dollars buys a lot of beer."

"Yeah, and a hell of a hangover."

Before he got down step one Paul heard Flesher put the door on the chain. By the time he reached the foot of the stairs he felt himself sweating again. With his free hand he fingered the folded scrap of paper in his pocket. X marked what spot? So much outlay of self for so little payoff. If it was going to be like this all along the way...

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Earlier in the Mercury and again in the cab he had spotted a hack stand just around the corner. But before he reached the corner a pair of dudes unlounged from a doorway. They looked like trouble.

They were trouble. They had already sized him up — the case alone promised something worth hocking — and were splitting up to take him.

"Don't look now, Kraut, but I think I'm in for a mugging."

"Jeez, kid, don't do nothing dumb. I don't want to lose you."

"Thanks."

They were coming fast, giving him no chance of making it back up the street to Flesher's or the botanica. That was his heart not their boots clumping and lumbering like Birnam Wood. One would move behind him and armlock his head. The other would hold a switchblade to him and pick him clean.

"Here they come."

He put down his urge to put up a fight. He would not be able to hack it. One slip and he would be flat and helpless on the sidewalk, his head and ribs and groin targets of opportunity for those high-heeled boots. He saw a man across the street stop and look on interestedly. He drew a deep breath as they boxed him in; then his head was in a vise and his vision narrowed to a wide emptiness that filled with the pebbly face of the one with the knife. He made himself go calm and unresisting and got out one word.

"Take."

No sweat. Let them have what they wanted, and he would come out of it all right.

But a wave of queasiness rolled through and swelled into fright. His heart raced at a nightmare gallop. Then something wild: the eyes of the dude facing him bulged full of a mirroring fright.

The hand reaching for Paul's wallet stopped. Paul felt a stabbing in his chest. But it didn't come from the switchblade; straining eyes showed him that barely touching him and lower down. At the same time the one behind him gave a gasp of pain and the jaws of the vise shook and opened. The one in front with a cry of fear grabbed the case and turned to run.

As if the scuffling sound had cued him, Kraut shouted.

"Put me down! Put me down!"

The mugger froze, then threw the case from him and fled.

Paul stood swaying. Light flashed at the end of the tunnel, and he sucked air. A dulling weariness kept him from realizing at once that though he still felt the pressure the headlock was off. He looked around. Both dudes were gone. The man across the street moved along. Slowly Paul walked

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over to the case. He bent to pick it up and nearly fell into a blackness. Then he was upright and carrying it step by kicking step toward the corner.

"You all right, kid? What's happening?"

Kraut's voice sounded anxious and grew more anxious in the repeating while Paul shuddered back into shape to answer.

"It's all over, Kraut. I'm okay. They ran away."

"Did you feel scared?"

Kraut sounded strangely eager to know.

Paul made a face at the case.

"I don't remember being that scared, not even in Nam. Damn right, I felt scared." He looked ahead in wonder, at nothing. "Funny, though, I wasn't alone in being scared."

Kraut laughed.

"I know."

Paul eyed the case curiously.

"Don't tell me you were scared too."

"*Me* scared? Hell, no. I *done* the scaring."

"No, I mean before that. I got scared and they got scared *before* you started to shout."

"Kid, I'm trying to tell you. What happened was, I whistled. No, I ain't crazy. You didn't hear because the intense note I emitted was below audibility. Those low frequencies produce nausea, fright, panic, chest pains, blurred vision, dizziness, and lastly a coma-like lassitude. I run across that bit of dope while I was hunting a voice for myself. Sure come in handy, hey, kid?" Kraut laughed a happy dirty laugh. "So they run away. It worked, huh? It really worked?"

"It worked."

Now that he knew, and now that he knew from the passing of the symptoms that Kraut was no longer silently sounding the alarm-making note, he knew true fear.

6

It had been a harried harridan listening and talking over her vacuum cleaner who had told him he could wait on the porch for Sgt. Mark Nolan if he wanted to.

He wanted to. It was another part of Newark, but it was under the same inverted air mass, and it was only a half hour after the mugging. He could use the rest.

He saw he shared the porch with a b.u.f.e. He smiled a half smile at the big ugly glazed ceramic elephant with its garish toenails and tasseled harness and saddle. The small pull of the smile brought neck muscles into play and a worm gnawed at his Adam's apple. Still sore from the mugging. Trunk raised, the buffy stood two and a half feet high and must have weighed the limit, seventy pounds. In the gloom of the screened porch

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he could not tell whether it was an off-white or a pale pink. Grunts must have bought and shipped home a million of the bloody useless fucking elephants. He dozed himself back on patrol and woke sweating.

A brown girl in a green VW dropped a white man off at the curb and drove away with a wave. The man climbed the stoop slowly and came in. Paul stood up, articulating stiffly.

"Sgt. Nolan?"

The man wiped the smile off his ruddy face and let the screen door spank him. He thumbed at the disappearing car.

"Nice girl. Works in the bank. Gives me a lift home whenever she can. Lots of them work in banks these days."

Under droopy lids the eyes were the eyes of an old cop and were trying to make Paul.

Paul introduced himself and told Nolan why he was there.

Nolan's eyes distanced him from Paul. But questioning the dying Kraut had to be Nolan's big moment, and Paul saw the wariness recede. Nolan unbuttoned his jacket.

"I could change at the bank, but I guess I like to wear this maroon jacket with the bank's patch on it home to let the neighbors know I pay me own way. Still put in a good day's work, I do, moonlighting on Social Security. Don't look sixty-eight, do I? Keeping busy's what does it. Let yourself rust and you fall apart."

"I guess you're right."

"I know I'm right. Take the couch. I'll take the rocker; its cushion is fitted to me like the astronauts' seats fit them. Don't let that elephant fool you. I'm a good Democrat, though I voted for Nixon account of he's against permissiveness." He shot a look at Paul. "My grandson sent that thing all the way from Vietnam when he was there."

"I was there too. I watched the old folks and the little kids make them. Regular assembly line."

"Good boy, good boy. I hate them damn draft dodgers. Amnesty. I'd give them amnesty. I guess you know how I'd give them amnesty. But it was a bad war and I'm glad it's over for us. We never should of went in to help them in the first place, but once we went in, we should of wiped them out."

"That's a point of view, all right."

"Damn right."

From an inside pocket Paul drew the copy of Kraut's statement. He made a lap desk of the phone case.

"Hold on, son. Before we tackle that I'll get me daughter-in-law to bring us cold beers. Aggie." A long silence. Nolan called again, louder.

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Another long silence. His face turned ruddier. "She's growing deaf. I'll get the beers."

"Don't bother."

"I said beers and I meant beers."

Nolan shoved himself up and went inside. A back and forth of muttering, then Nolan returned, ruddier yet, bearing two cans of Rheingold and a pair of cardboard coasters. He pulled the tabs fiercely and handed Paul one can and a coaster.

"You don't look the kind of guy minds drinking from the can."

"Matter of fact, I like it better. Loses too much fizz when you pour it out."

"That's what I say." He took a long pull and then nodded his readiness. Paul fed him the first page. Nolan examined it. "Yes, this looks like a copy of what we took down that day. You want me to go over it word by word to see if there are any mistakes?"

"Well, that, but mostly to see if anything in it brings something more to mind."

The drinking and the reading ended at the same time. Nolan shook his head with a sigh for both.

"Can't think of a thing but what's there."

Paul pocketed the copy.

"Does the symbol or letter or numeral X mean anything to you?"

He drew one with his finger upon the case on his lap.

Nolan shook his head while thinking.

"Not in connection with Kraut, if that's what you're asking." He leaned forward and tapped Paul's knee. "Listen, son." Nolan's finger did a double take, then lifted as if stung. "Sorry. I didn't know."

Paul smiled and nodded. Nolan hawked and swallowed.

"Listen, son. I can tell you one thing. I said then and I say now this handle Olive Eye stands for the hood that knocked Kraut off and the three with him. The mob always brings in someone from out of state to do a job like this: when it's done he leaves and you never see him again. Now, neither one of Harry the Wack Spector's eyes was olive color. So I believe they pinned the rap on the wrong guy when they nailed the Wack for it. Though I wouldn't of shed tears if they give the Wack the chair, because he deserved it for other things they never could pin on him. But I think the Wack took a fall. Now what do you say to that for a theory?"

"That's a theory, all right."

"Damn right."

Paul levered himself up off the couch.

"Thank you, Sgt. Nolan."

"Only sorry I can't be more help."

"You can. When you go in, will

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you phone for a cab to pick me up?"

"Sure thing, son. Right away." Nolan stuck out his hand and they shook. "Glad to've met you. I really mean it."

"Thanks. Same here."

Nolan picked up the cans and coasters and elbowed inside. Paul left the porch and waited on the curb.

7

He entered the Tivoli Chophouse and Tavern only to find himself walking into a Viet Cong ambush. After that woke him he was good only for fitful sleep. He checked out of the motel before dawn, exchanging yawns with the desk clerk.

An early start out of Newark at least let him beat the lemming rush across the Hudson. On the Mercury's radio he heard the WCBS traffic-advisory helicopter pilot say something about the approaches to the G. W. Bridge. Paul shook his head.

Up to now his admiration for those chopper pilots had been sky's the limit. Just to think of them juggling air currents and topography with one hand and scribbling notes with the other — let alone *seeing* the Metropolitan Area through the dark brown air...

"But honestly, fella, 'G. W. Bridge'? G. W. may *look* shorter than George Washington but it *sounds* every inch as long."

He felt brighter at once; then the voice of Kraut on the passenger seat cast its shadow.

"You got a point there, kid. Now, remember, when you get off the G. W. Bridge, you head north to reach the Bronx and Co-op City."

"I know, I know."

He switched to an FM music station. Maybe some loud reggae would shake the old know-it-all.

It still rang in his own ears as he pressed the doorbell under the name M. Moldover.

Shouting "Paul Felder" at the peephole brought only "Who? Who?" Then mention of Kraut Schwartz's name magicked a siege of chains and bolts. The woman almost pulled him off balance getting him in.

"Ssh. The neighbors."

He thought he saw Kraut's features, at least as they appeared in the old newspaper photos, in Molly Moldover, the likeness likely more striking now she had moved into the unisex stage.

She shook her head as he explained his mission, but she had only shaken it in wonderment.

"Funny you should show up just now."

"Oh?"

"Haven't you seen?"

It was his turn to shake his

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head. She picked up a *Daily News* and turned from a supermarket ad to a story on page three.

DEAD BIRDS OF A FEATHER?

NEWARK, N.J., Apr. 3—A 70-year-old retired bartender, a figure out of the gangster era of the Thirties, turned up dead in his apartment on East Park Street here yesterday with a dead canary on his chest. He had six bullet holes in his head.

Newark policemen investigating the murder of the ex-bartender, Max Flesher, declined today to comment on whether he had been a police informant. Over the years, the dead canary has been used as a symbol by criminals of informers who "sing" to the police.

Mr. Flesher's body was found by police responding to an anonymous tip. None of Mr. Flesher's neighbors so far questioned report hearing shots. It is possible, police say, the killer used a silencer. Robbery appears not to have been the motive; police said there were five crisp 10-dollar bills in Mr. Flesher's wallet.

Back in 1935 Mr. Flesher had his moment in the limelight. He was tending bar the night Harry "The Wack" Spector strode into the Tivoli Chophouse and Tavern and mowed down Kraut Schwartz and three of Schwartz's cohorts.

Mr. Flesher, according to the police, leaves no known survivors. He was fully clothed at the time of his death, the police said, and apparently had not gone to bed. The police said Mr. Flesher was not known to have a pet canary.

Paul numbly handed the paper back.

Mrs. Moldover sighed. Her eyes blinked behind thick lenses, no more a blur now than when still.

"Awful, isn't it? I myself never knew the man, but it's terrible to think the killing never ends."

Paul nodded. Then for the benefit of Kraut, suddenly heavy in his right hand, he spoke.

"Max Flesher. Poor old Max Flesher."

Mrs. Moldover took a step back.

"Did *you* know him?"

"Oh, no, no. I just came across the name in reading up on your brother. And speaking of—"

"Yes, well, about that. I'd

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rather not discuss. The neighbors don't even know Albert was my brother."

"Sooner or later they'll find out. That's just why I think you should discuss. He's had a bad press. I'd like to get from you the human side of your brother."

"Human? What's human? Killing is human. Stealing is human. Lying is human. What kind things would you want to know?"

"We'd start off with this."

Paul drew out the copy of Kraut's ravings and handed it to her. She brought it into focus.

"Albert said all this? My, such a mishmash of words. But you have to remember he was out of his head, he was dying." She turned and looked at the sunburst wall clock. "I was getting ready to go out shopping, things I need."

"I have a car. I'll drive you wherever you're going and bring you back and we can talk on the way."

She eyed him a long time but what went on behind the lenses he could not tell. Then she nodded and spoke, to herself first.

"A boy. A nice boy. All right. But back I can get by myself. A bus goes between here and the New Rochelle Mall."

She picked up her coat and her plastic-net shopping bag. He helped her on with her coat.

She sighed herself into the passenger seat, and they pulled away from Co-op City. He grinned: Coop City more like it. Mrs. Moldover caught his grin and nodded.

"Yes, this place is more and more full of widows. If they're not widows when they move in, they're widows before they're here long, like me. The men around here are dropping like flies."

And he saw the women everywhere, strolling, standing, sitting.

He tried to keep the wheels out of potholes, the ride smooth for Mrs. Moldover's reading.

"Now here the man taking it down didn't know what he was taking down. 'Pushcarts'! The word is *pushkes*. And even a goy should know 'gone if' ought to be *gonif*. I was four years younger than Albert—that's a lot when you're young—and I hardly knew him. But now I remember something I forgot all these years.

"Every Friday afternoon before lighting the Shabbos candles mamma put the spare change in slots in the pushkes, little tin boxes on the kitchen wall, one red, one yellow, one blue, from different charities. Every once in a while some bearded man with a black bag came and had a glass tea he sucked through a lump of sugar and took out a little steel claw hammer, pulled one of the tin boxes off the wall, and emptied the

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coins and fluff and insect dust ooftish—on the table—on the oilcloth—it was chipped where it draped over the corners of the table—and counted the money and wrote it down and scraped the coins into his bag and tacked the box back on the wall.

"The money would go to orphans and sages in Palestine. It was Palestine then. One time I woke in the middle of the night and while I was trying to figure why I woke I heard mamma say again, 'Gonif!' And then papa said, 'Do I swipe? Does the mamma swipe? From who you learn this?' And I crawled out of bed and peeked into the kitchen and there they were standing over Albert and all three pushkes were ooftish and they were empty and there was one big pile of coins.

"And papa raised his hand but Albert ducked under and grabbed a knife from the sink counter and held it in front of him and dared papa with his eyes. That's all I remember. I think maybe I screamed and fainted. I only know from that time Albert got worse. One day I guess papa got tired trying to handle him or maybe just got tired trying to make ends meet. Papa left home. Deserted us. Mamma took in washing and janitored at the tenement we lived in. I read somewhere a reporter once asked Albert if it was true papa deserted the family when Albert was ten. Albert said no, when he was ten his father died."

She brought the page into focus again.

"'A spill of diamonds and rubies. Watch the wine-stained light pass over the tablecloth...' We only had the tablecloth on holidays. That has to do with Passover but I don't know does he mean the colored shadow of the wine bottle or the flashes when we dipped the pinkie and shook of a drop of wine for each of the ten plagues.

"The man with the soup strainer was papa. He had a great big droopy mustache. I remember now he kind of honed his old safety razor blade on the inside of a glass to get at least one more shave out of it. He'd pinch a cigarette out and save it. He'd stick a pin through a butt so he could hold it to smoke to the very end."

She shook her head.

"I don't see anything else I know till this. 'She tied a babushka over her head to hold her hat on in the wind.' That's mama out shoveling the snow off the walk or scattering ashes on the ice. 'Rip van Nipple, and the silver fell out.' That' not 'Nipple'; it's *knippl,* a knot in a handkerchief in which mamma kept change for the iceman and so on. The knot came untied once and the silver spilled. Albert and I helped pick it up and I

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saw Albert palm a dime. I knew he knew I saw, so I didn't dare tell on him. If mamma noticed it was missing she didn't say anything.

"'Your Monday's longer than your Tuesday' is what a woman used to say in mixed company to warn another woman her slip was showing. I don't know why Albert should say it here."

She had only one more gloss—"'Yentzer' means 'cheater'"—before handing the pages back. They rode in silence but for the road hum the few minutes more it took to reach the New Rochelle Mall. She put her hand on his arm as he reached across to open the car door for her.

"Please don't wait. I'll take the bus back."

It hit him how brave she had been, or how trusting, so close on Max Flesher's death, to let the stranger take her for a ride. He didn't press her. He wanted to talk longer and learn more, but his stronger need was to be free to consult with Kraut. In a murder investigation every minute of lead time counted if you rated as a suspect. He guessed he rated as a suspect.

The last he saw of her face he thought he spotted tears behind the blurry lenses, but he could not be sure.

"That was fine, kid. What come out of that confirms I had money on the mind. Next on the agenda is Mort Lesser in Brooklyn. You got the address."

"What's the matter, no family feeling, Kraut? Not even an artificial catch in the artificial throat?"

"What are you talking? Oh, sure, kid. When we get our mitts on the ten megabucks, we cut Molly in for some. Same goes for my widow and daughter. Take it out of my end. Meanwhile we got work to do. Take the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, that's your best bet."

"Not so fast, Kraut. There's the small matter of Max Flesher, deceased. With a canary, deceased, on his chest."

"Is that what happened? Jeez, like old times."

"I don't recall if I told Sgt. Nolan I visited Flesher —"

"You didn't."

"—but there's still a chance the cops will tie me in some other way to the killing."

"How?"

"Poring over the nice new notes I gave Flesher, for the talk and for the scrap of paper with the X on it, they might come up with my prints. Even if not, I could have left prints on a chair or a table or a wall."

"I see what you mean, pal. You were in the service, so your prints are on file. I'm putting you on hold. Here I go."

It was mixed feelings to know

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that Kraut could work behind the scenes.

He was thinking Flesher's landlord would be getting a rent hike on the flat now, when a police car pulled up alongside.

"There's a no-standing regulation, buddy. You got out-of-state tags, so I'm just telling you."

"Thanks, officer."

The police car pulled away and Paul followed suit. He headed for the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. He started at Kraut's voice.

"You can relax, pal. I retrieved the situation. I demagnetized the code on your prints. And just in time. The FBI computer was about to pull your card."

"Good work."

Paul supposed he should have sounded more grateful. But he realized that though Kraut had kept him out of it for now, Kraut had a hold on him in the blackmail sense.

Kraut's voice seemed richer with the same realization.

"Now that's took care of, how's about we head for the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. Brooklyn, remember?"

It was getting to be a downer.

"Take it easy, Kraut. My stomach's telling me it's lunchtime. Remember stomachs?"

"O.K., kid. O.K. Do your number."

8

Mort Lesser had a nose flattened as though pressing against a pane of glass. His big ugly mouth became a sculptured smile.

Paul trailed Lesser's glance out through the stationery store window, past the Mercury hitched to a meter post, and up at a fillet of mackerel sky. Then Paul followed Lesser's glance back inside the claustrophilic clutter.

"Time I have. Not all the time in the world, but time. You can see yourself it's not quite as busy here as, say, in the bank on Social Security check-cashing day. But I get by." He grimaced as he trailed Paul's glance. "I have to take what the distributor gives. There were too many returns on the decent reading. Now it's this porno trash or nothing. But I warned the distributor I'm a Hershey bar."

"Hershey bar?"

"The Hershey bar gets smaller and smaller to stay the same price. But it can get only so small. I can shrink myself only so small before I'm nothing, a man without quality or quantity. Only one thing keeps me from giving up the store. I don't want to hang out with old people." The old eyes twinkled. "But you didn't come here to hear me kvetch. You came here to have me read this." He shook the sheaf of Kraut's ravings. "So I'll read it. Meanwhile, feel free to browse."

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His eyes seemed far away from his body when he looked up from reading.

"It's hard to believe this came from Kraut. He was a lump without leaven. But there was a spark, there was a spark. Yes, I can see this wasn't just nonsense. Some things jump right out at me."

"For instance."

"For instance" —Lesser's ears grew red—"'the lesser of the two looks the more.' Kraut always found it to laugh at that I looked more like a hood than he did. You see, I was always a square, but one day a man came into my first stationery store for a nickel cigar — a nickel cigar; you can imagine how far back that was — and stared at me and then told me he was an artist who did covers and interior artwork for Black Mask and the other crime pulps. He talked me into posing for him. Usually I'd be holding a rod and a sneer. I could use the few dollars he paid — that was at the height of the Depression, if you'll pardon the oxymoron — but I never could make up my mind whether or not I liked doing it. Especially after Kraut found out and kidded me about it. He was a very unsubtle kidder."

Paul tried to visualize Lesser with the bushy gray hair sleek and black, the eyes narrowed and not behind glasses, the lines fewer but tenser, the wide mouth pressed in a corrugated smile. Yes, Mort Lesser would have made a Thirties gangster, a movie heavy.

He grew aware that Lesser was studying him just as hard. Both grinned. Lesser gave an apologetic twist of his head.

"Excuse me for staring. My own face has given me a thing about faces. I study faces. A stranger shows you one face on your first meeting; you do not know how much weight to give this first impression. You need a number of meetings, to average out all the faces he shows you. However, it usually turns out the first impression is the truest."

"And your first impression of me?"

For some reason Paul really wanted to know, and he waited for Mort Lesser's slow answer.

"Generally favorable." Again the beautiful smile of the ugly mouth. Mort Lesser tapped the sheaf. "But this really interests me. I hope you don't mind if I skip around. In my philosophy, the beginning is never the beginning and the end is never the end. So I pick up on whatever interests me at the moment. I know that's not the way to get ahead in this world. But for me it's a bit late in life to learn new tricks. So.

"'Dan, Dan, the Telescope Man. The little dog laughed to see such sport.' In the old days in

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Manhattan down on Union Square there was Dan the Telescope Man. A sign hung from his tripod: 'See Old Sirius, the Dog Star, 10 cents.' Kraut would get some other kid to distract Dan so Kraut could sneak a free look. Sirius. That's in the constellation Canis Major, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"No matter. To observers in another part of the galaxy it would seem part of another constellation. It's possible to form constellations and even chains out of random events. You can find patterns in a list of random numbers. All this Gestalt we call life, even the universe, is only a tiny run of seeming sense in the great randomness." He broke off with a grin. "A philosopher *manque,* you observe."

His finger stabbed at another point in the ravings.

"'Sympathy of clocks.' One day on the way home from school I stopped in with Kraut to ask the watch repairman in his little shop what he knew about a sympathy of clocks. That's a phenomenon, you know, in which clocks communicate their vibrational motion to one another. I wanted to find out if it was true that a faulty clock will tick away nicely while it's in the repair shop in the company of other ticking clocks but will stop as soon as you take it out of the shop.

"Kraut seemed interested too — and I found out later he really was interested. He was casing the joint. A couple of nights later Kraut and another kid broke in and cleaned the place out. Got away with it too. The watchmaker must've thought I was in on it with Kraut. He never trusted me after that, wouldn't give me the time of day."

Mort Lesser looked into his own distance.

"You know, if it hadn't been for that, I think the watchmaker would have taught me the trade and in time taken me in with him. I might've made something of myself, become an inventor, maybe, because I had a feel for machinery and enjoyed working with my hands. Well.

"'The scorpion stung the uncle.' The Hebrew for that is *'Detzach adash beachab.'* It's a mnemonic acrostic for the ten plagues in the Passover account." He looked embarrassed. "I'm not religious, but I like to ponder the texts. Let's see if I remember.

"*Dom,* blood. *Tz'fardaya,* frogs. *Kinim,* gnats. *'Arov,* flies. *Dever,* murrain. *Sh'chin,* boils. *Borod,* hail. *Arbeh,* locusts. *Choshech,* darkness. *Makas B'choros,* slaying of the first-born. I doubt Kraut would consciously remember all that, but his family did observe Passover when he was a kid, and so

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he must have read the Haggadah in the Hebrew-English booklets the matzoh manufacturers gave out, and strange things stick in the mind.

"Now this about 'J for Jig' and so on, I don't know. But while I'm on knucklebones, I've always wondered — is it only me, or does everyone get a squeamish feeling when he touches thumb to thumb at the joints? Or the anklebones together? Or even thinks about it?"

A man came in to pay for a *New York Post* out of a ten, and another man caught the door on the swing and came in impatient to buy a New York State Lottery ticket. It grew quite busy and crowded in there for one minute.

"Now where was I? 'Tell us who did it and we'll nail them.' 'Olive Eye.' That could be Yiddish two ways. Olive is *aylbirt;* Kraut's name was Albert. 'Olive Eye' would then mean 'I, myself.' But surely he's not saying he shot himself? No. 'Olive Eye' is really *'Allevy,'* meaning, 'It should only be that way!'"

"Who's the Hungarian?"

"The Hungarian?"

"See here where he says, 'Okay, boss, only don't say it in front of a Hungarian.'"

Mort Lesser looked and then laughed.

"There's no Hungarian. Kraut was getting in a dig at the cop questioning him. 'Boss' is a four-letter word in Hungarian. Little did I dream Kraut would be one to suit the *mot juste* to the *beau geste.* He was a personality of glowering silences. 'An itch for the scratch' reminds me of the day he came to school and sat at his desk playing with rolls of dimes. When I got home that afternoon, I heard talk that somebody had burgled the cash drawer of the Itch — the neighborhood movie house — the night before. But neither I nor any of the other kids nor even the teacher said anything to anyone about Kraut's rolls of dimes.

"'She read it Rainbow' — that was Miss O'Reilly our second-grade teacher. She always read Schwartz's real name — Rabinow — as Rainbow when taking attendance. She called the holiday 'Tcha-*noo*-kah.' For some reason she took a shine to Kraut. When he got restless she used to let him sit off by himself and read nursery rhymes. Maybe because she found out or felt that he never got such softening influences at home.

"I heard her once tell him, 'Albert, you'll come to a bad end.' And he cocked an eye at her and said, 'So what? I come from a bad beginning. Anything in between is gravy.' That was in P.S. 12. The principal then was Dr. J. F. Condon. He went on to win fame as the go-between in the Lindbergh baby kidnaping. That's him in 'a

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jiffy, a jafsie.' Kraut dropped out in the middle of the sixth grade.

"I kept seeing him through the years. It was his doing; he did the looking up. Why?" Mort Lesser shrugged. "For one thing, he knew I didn't want anything from him. I was a relief from his paranoia, from his always having to be suspicious of everybody. Once he told me there are only two animals in the world — the steer and the butcher. For another thing, he liked to astonish and impress me. I don't know that it was a love-hate relationship so much as that he felt free to talk to me.

"Though once, after talking too freely, he nearly decided to kill me. He broke off in the middle of telling me something or other and without warning hauled off and bloodied my nose. 'What's that for?' I asked. 'I been shooting off my mouth too much,' he said, 'and you been on the Erie too long.' 'So what has my nose got to do with it?' I said. He already had his gun out and was aiming it at my temple when that seemed to sink in. His eyes changed, and he touched the cold metal of the gun barrel to the nape of my neck. I went cold all over. But he laughed at my expression and said he was only stopping the bleeding.

"After, he showed me a deputy sheriff's badge, a brass potsy, that gave him the right to pack a forty-five. He said he got the appointment from some rube sheriff up in the Catskills. Then, just before he left, he washboarded his knuckles across my head in a Dutch rub, the way he did when we were both kids. Only extra hard. That was our last meeting.

"A few months later, the Tivoli massacre." He looked away. "A Cohen can't go into a funeral parlor. For once I was glad I'm a Cohen." He looked back at Paul with a smile. "You know, I try to believe in God but God doesn't make it easy."

"What were you talking about?"

"I just said. God."

"No, I mean with Kraut last time you saw him."

"Funny, I don't remember. No, wait. I know. He talked about the way Legs Diamond and other mobsters died broke. He wasn't going to let it happen to him. He said he had a chest so full of jewels and thousand-dollar bills that he had to have somebody sit on it to close it."

A hum of satisfaction came from the phone case at Paul's feet.

Paul covered and rebuked with a cough. But Mort Lesser seemed not to have noticed. He was folding the pages, getting ready to hand them back. Paul thanked him for his help and bought a lot of stuff he didn't need — cough drops, candy,

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chewing gum. Mort Lesser counted out the change slowly.

"Let me also hand you a bit of advice, young fellow. Live. I have never really lived. The trouble is I got too serious about too many things too soon."

He rested an elbow on the rubber change pad on the counter and cupped a chin that must have been blue when he was younger.

"Then again, I could have ended up riddled in the Tivoli; Albert could have ended up running this stationery. I always thought we might easily have been each other."

9

The express-lane check-out clerk wore a sweater over her shoulders. She would be in her late fifties. She looked it, and yet again when she smiled, she didn't look it. Most likely the 18-year-old cigarette girl in a speak-easy had never dreamed of anything as wildly tame as a supermarket in Babylon, Long Island.

Paul watched her while seeming to blister-shop the packages on the gondola shelves. It was closing in on closing time, and the last shoppers were leaving. He picked up a ten-pack of Rheingold quickies and took it to the express lane and passed her a crisp twenty.

She shot glances at his face and at a list of serial numbers taped to the register, then rang up the sale.

He waited in the Mercury. The supermarket dimmed and the parking lot emptied. She came out carrying a small bag of groceries. He watched her head for the bus stop. He rolled up alongside her and opened the passenger door.

She looked away, frightened and yet pleased, frowning at something familiar about him.

"Mrs. Rabinow—"

She looked frightened and displeased.

"It isn't Rabinow. It's Bogen. You've made a mistake." She had a little-girl voice, littler than when she had spoken the price of the ten-pack and the thank-you.

"Please get in, Mrs. Bogen. Let me drive you home."

"I don't know you. Do I? No, you're the ten-pack of Rheingold. What do you want? Why were you waiting for me?"

He told her.

She stood still, biting her lip. Her head started to swing sidewise.

"There might be something in it for you, Mrs. Bogen."

She glanced back up the road, shrugged and slid in.

"Well, I suppose it's better than waiting and waiting for that old bus."

He moved the phone case to the floor between them to make room for the bag of groceries. As they pulled away, he saw the bus grow in

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the rear-view mirrow before it shrank again.

He took a right and a left and another right. He felt her gaze on him.

"You know where I live?"

She lived in a modest garden apartment. She beat him to the bag of groceries as they made ready to get out of the car.

"Thanks, but I can manage." She smiled. "If the prices keep going up, even the employees' discount won't mean a thing."

He wondered why she thought she had to let him know she hadn't stolen the stuff. He got out carrying the phone case. She raised an eyebrow.

"You're not moving in, are you?"

"It's a tape recorder, but I won't use it if you don't want me to."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Mind if I bring it along anyway? I'd rather not leave it in the car."

She shrugged, turned and led the way. She put the key in the lock but didn't turn it.

"Listen, if my granddaughter comes in while we're talking, you're trying to sell me insurance."

"Your granddaughter? I thought it was your daughter who lives with you."

"My granddaughter, Mr. Felder." She fluffed up the hair on the back of her head. "So you don't know everything about me, do you?"

He eyed the phone case and smiled. Kraut wasn't infallible even this close to home.

"I guess I don't. But why insurance?"

"Because she doesn't know she's the granddaughter of Kraut Schwartz, and I don't want her to know." She turned the key. "Still double-locked, so Mimsy isn't home yet." But she called out Mimsy's name as they went in. "She works days as an office temporary, comes home for supper, then goes to business school week nights. Have a seat while I put the bag away. Of groceries, that is."

She came back to find him looking around at room ideas out of *House Beautiful.*

"Nice, huh?"

"Very." He drew out the pages of Kraut's ravings. "Mrs. Rabinow, I'd like you to—"

"I told you it's Bogen. I know I didn't change the name legal, just took this other name, but as long as you don't use the other name for anything shady, the law can't touch you. That's what Macie Devlin told me, and if you know anything, you know he was Albert's high-priced attorney."

Paul nodded.

She seated herself facing him with mixed satisfaction and anxiety.

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"It's hard for a woman alone to raise a child. Besides, I had a lot to learn. You have to remember I wasn't much more than a child myself when Albert died and I broke all the old ties. Not that I didn't already know a lot about life. After all, I was married to the great Kraut Schwartz. And that wasn't arranged by a *shotgun.*"

Paul shook his head to clear it. "Shotgun?"

"I don't know how you spell it, but that's how you say it. *Shotgun.* You know, a Jewish matchmaker. But I knew all the wrong things. I guess I made mistakes trying to bring up Rose Marie. She left home when she was eighteen, and I haven't heard from her since. For all I know she's dead, the Blessed Virgin have mercy on her soul. But at least I have Mimsy to show for it. My granddaughter. Rose Marie left her with me. God knows I've tried to bring *her* up right." She leaned towards him. "Like I said, she doesn't know she's Kraut Schwartz's granddaughter. I doubt if she's even heard the name. So please promise you won't tell her, and I'll try to help you any way I can."

"Mrs. Bogen, I promise."

"I knew by looking at you I could trust you." She sighed and held out her hand for the Xerox pages. "Now let me read that thing before Mimsy comes."

She read till tears made ghost images of the type. She shook her head and handed the pages to Paul.

"Sorry. It's still crazy talk. Funny how this brings it all back. They took me in to see him and talk to him. I guess they hoped he would spill who shot him; they thought my being there would make him forget himself long enough to break that stupid code of honor. But seeing him like that and hearing him talk crazy was more than I could take. A few minutes of it and I had to run out. Next time I saw him he was dead. Two days after he died there in Newark I raised the money to claim his body and take him to the Bronx. We sneaked the casket out the back way and buried him as a Roman Catholic, though his mother made me put a what-do-you-call-it, tallith, on the coffin."

"Are you sure nothing in this means anything to you? Because there's a chance that somewhere in these words of his there's a lead to where he hid millions."

She laughed and the tears flowed again.

"Millions! You mean people believe to this day that old story of Kraut Schwartz's hidden treasure? Please. If anyone knew, I would know, and—" The sound of a key in the lock. "Mother of God, it's Mimsy. You stall her but don't say anything. I have to run wash my face."

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She hurried away. He pushed himself upright as the door opened.

A girl stopped short and sized him up for a karate chop. She tilted her head to the sound of splashing, relaxed, and dropped the key in her purse. But she kept her hand in there, likely on a long fingernail file.

"Hello. Who are you?"

"The name's Paul Felder. And you're Mimsy."

"Ms. Bogen to you. What are you doing here? Are you a friend of Florence's?"

"Mrs. Bogen to me. I'm trying to sell her some insurance."

Mimsy made a face of letdown.

"And here I thought you might be a strangler. How unexciting."

"And at first I thought you were Gloria Steinem, model number 217."

She flushed and whipped off her Gloria Steinem glasses.

"Florence, I'm home."

"Oh, are you, dear?" Mrs. Bogen popped her head out of the kitchen. "I was just getting supper ready."

"With your gentleman-caller waiting out here?" Mimsy frowned. "You mean he's staying for supper?"

"Well, now, dear..."

The tail of his eye showed him Florence Bogen shaking her head. Mimsy smiled at him suddenly. Under her gaze he grew aware that he hadn't fully seated the folded pages in the inside pocket of his jacket. He tucked them in. Mimsy tossed her head to whip the hair from her eyes.

"Sure, let's invite Mr. Felder if we haven't already. He can burp for his supper by driving me to class."

He tried to keep his eyes on the road.

"Such talk. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"I'm sure it went over her head. Poor Florence leads a sheltered life." She hitched herself around to ride sidesaddle and leaned warmly near. "All right, Felder, what did you tell her to make her cry? You don't think I missed the red eyes and the puffiness?"

"Nothing. Only the high cost of insurance."

"Watch it, Felder. You may need coverage yourself." She blew in his ear. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Ask her. She'll tell you if she wants you to know."

She froze, then melted. She spoke in a thoughtful voice.

"I can be nice." She kissed him.

His hands tightened on the wheel, and there was a twist of overcontrol. They rode in silence; then he gave an inward sigh of relief.

"This must be the place."

He pulled up at the curb and

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read the gilt lettering on the windows. The school specialized in data processing. Mimsy was quite a girl. Mustn't be chauvinistic; quite a person. No, damn it; quite a girl. Too bad what might have been but never could be had to end before it began.

She spoke in a thoughtful voice.

"And I can be mean. I warn you, I'll find out. And if it's bad, God help you, Paul Felder, wherever you are." She bit his ear.

He faced the windshield. Her reflection showed her gazing at him. He saw her shake her head.

"I do better with an office machine."

Then she was sliding out of his car and out of his life.

10

He had just caught the name Morton Lesser when the car radio faded, though he wasn't going through an underpass. He raised the volume. No good. He twiddled the tuning knob to overcome drift. No good. He heard a hum from the phone case. Could Kraut be jamming the signal?

"Cut it out, Kraut, or I'll litter the road with you."

He pressed the button to give Kraut the window-lower sound for effect and slapped his free hand on the handle of the phone case.

"Take it easy, pal."

The hum stopped, the radio station came through full strength. Too late. The news item had ended for him, and by now it was leaking its way out to the stars.

"All right now, Kraut. You must've caught it all, so play it back. I'll only get it on another newscast anyway."

"If you say so, pal. I just didn't want you worrying about nothing." Kraut rattled it off in the announcer's voice.

Mort Lesser had died an hour ago in a holdup of his stationery store. Witnesses said the holdup man, wearing a stocking mask, had cleaned out the register and then for no apparent reason had shot and killed Lesser.

Paul pulled off onto the shoulder and switched on the Mercury's parking blinker. It could be a simple holdup-murder. Then again it could be more. If more, then Max Flesher's death could be more than a canary-throttling already in the works whether Paul had called on him or not. Did both deaths tie in with his digging up Kraut's death afresh?

But then again, Jefferson and Adams, ex-Presidents and co-signers of the Declaration of Independence, died on the same Fourth of July. A sympathy of tickers! Yet mere coincidence, something less than met the eye. What had Mort Lesser himself said?

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It's possible to form constellations and even chains out of random events. You can find patterns in a list of random numbers. All this Gestalt we call life, even the universe, is only a tiny run of seeming sense in the great randomness.

But then yet again, to have jammed the signal at the first mention of Mort Lesser's name Kraut had to have known or guessed what was coming. That had been not censoring but precensoring. Had Kraut managed the news event as well as the sound of the newscast?

"What's wrong, kid? Why we stopping?"

"Everything's wrong. We're stopping the whole thing."

"What're you talking? We're on our way to ten megabucks. And that's only the beginning."

Fine, but was it only the beginning too of a large ciphering of deaths? He didn't want to push his bad luck or spread his Typhoid Mary touch. He had already involved Florence and Mimsy Bogen. And Molly Moldover, Kraut's sister.

"Deal me out."

"We'll talk about it later, kid, when you're thinking straight. You need to get yourself a good night's rest."

He pulled back into Sunrise traffic, made sure no one looking like Death was following him, and outside Bellmore chose a motel at random.

A good night's rest. He lay watching his travel clock semaphore the hours. At midnight he sat up, looked up the numbers, and dialed. Molly Moldover first.

He heard a talk show in the background.

"Hello?" She sounded turned away, lending one ear to the talk show.

"Is Herman there?"

"Herman?" A splutter of nosh. "You must have the wrong number."

"Sorry."

Now the Bogens. Mimsy's voice, sleepy, answered on the third ring.

"Yes?"

He remained silent, wanted to say something but not knowing what.

"Oh, I've got a breather."

He smiled. He spoke after he hung up.

"No, it's the strangler."

At least they were all safe as of this moment. He could go to sleep now if he could go to sleep. Too much imagination.

11

Dawn came up solid white with a runny yolk. Paul crossed from Long Island to Staten Island and remembered his way to Halloran Hospital.

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The medic beamed. It seemed all Halloran took pride in Jimmy Rath.

"Very rare, only about one thousand cases in the whole U.S. Wilson's disease usually doesn't show up till as late as forty or fifty, even later in Jimmy's case. A Wilson's disease patient has to stay off foods rich in copper — mushrooms, oysters, nuts, chocolates, liver, and so on, and take a chelating agent. Jimmy's showed remarkable improvement on that regimen. When we first took him in five years ago — he's a vet of World War I and entitled to treatment — he was bedridden. Now — well, you'll see for yourself. Be good for him to meet someone from outside — use up some of his excess energy. I hate to tranquilize him because of the side effects. That door. Straight through to the end of the Extended Care Pavilion. Go right in."

At the far end of the pavilion Paul came to a large solarium. Outside the glass the ground flowed away in smooth green. Inside, the other patients had cleared a space in the center of the room for two old men in motorized wheelchairs.

The two played a game of Dodgem, rolling, spinning, braking, reversing, each trying to bump without getting bumped. The spectators cheered them on as a young paraplegic announced the contest for the blind.

"...just in time Tommy leans away from a sideswipe. Jimmy makes a nice recovery, whizzes around in time to corner Tommy. Jimmy takes one to give two — and that does it, folks. That last bump nearly knocked Tommy out of his chair. Tommy seems game to go on, but the referee stops the contest in the third round. Winner and still champion, Jimmy Rath."

Paul waited for the congratulating and kidding to die down before he tackled Rath.

Jimmy Rath sleeved sweat from a face as congested from laughing as if he had been hanging head-down. He eyed the phone case.

"See me? Sure, kid, what can I do you for?"

Paul told him.

"Kraut Schwartz? Jesus H. Christ, I ain't thought about the bum in years."

"Bum?"

"When I was on the cops, they was all bums to me. They knew it, and unless they wanted a taste of my fist, they all walked wide. Pull up a chair. I see you was wounded yourself. Vietnam, right? I can tell.

"But Kraut, now. I mind the time old Kraut took out his fat wallet and started to tell me to buy my missus something nice for Christmas. My missus in his mouth. I grabbed aholt of the bum and stuck him upside down in a

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garbage can. Right there on Broadway in front of everybody. He never showed his face on my Broadway beat again after that." He cracked his knuckles. The sound apparently drowned out in his own ears a sudden hum from the phone case. "What's them papers you got there?"

Paul told him.

"Yeah? Well, I'll give it a whirl. But that was long ago, kid. Long ago." He read slowly through Kraut's ravings, looking up only when he had something to offer. "'It takes force...He'd never stop for a friendly smile, but trudged along in his moody style.' Now, 'Force' was the name of a ready-to-eat cereal. And there was a jingle about this Jim Dumps fellow who ate the stuff and became Sunny Jim. 'The golden hour of the little flower.' Sure, that was the program of the radio priest of them days. Father Coughlin, God rest his soul. 'He died with his daisies on.' That must mean the Limey—Vic Hazell. Another bum. 'Daisies' is short for 'daisy roots,' which is cockney rhyming slang for 'boots.' Vic was gunning for Kraut, but Kraut hid out till he could fix it for Vic to get knocked off while Vic was taking a phony phone call."

He read on to the end and shook his head.

"I guess that's it, kid. Did I help you at all?" He went on before Paul could say yes. "Uh-oh. The computer says it's time for my penicillamine."

Paul followed Jimmy Rath's gaze and saw a nurse heading their way.

"Everything here works by computer, kid. What doses to take and when to take them." He cracked his knuckles.

Paul picked up the phone case and stood.

"Thanks, Mr. Rath."

"Anytime, kid. Anytime."

Paul had made it to the parking lot when he thought he heard a crash of glass, then cries. He stood a moment beside the Mercury, shook his head when nothing more happened, tossed the phone case on the seat, and got behind the wheel. He had started rolling when the medic he had met came running out to wave him down. Paul braked and waited for the medic's breath to catch up.

"Did you say anything to Jimmy to get him worked up?"

Paul stared. He did not want to believe his premonition.

"No. We talked about his days on the New York Police force. He seemed happy remembering them. Why? What happened?"

"He's killed himself."

Paul got out and followed the medic, who took a short cut to the lawn outside the solarium.

They had spread a blanket over

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the twisted form of Jimmy Rath. After crashing through the floor-length window and careening down the grassy slope, the wheelchair had struck the rock wall at an angle, and Jimmy had momentum-tumbled along the roughness.

One of the top administrators took Paul to his office and began asking the same questions when the phone broke in. The man made a face as he hung up.

"Well, we know now what it was. All right, Felder, you can go."

"Like hell. I want to know what it was."

The man made another face, then sighed.

"It's going to come out sooner or later, so all right. It was a foul-up in the pharmacological computer. It ordered Jimmy's dose on time as usual, but for some stupid reason it made up some PCP instead of his penicillamine. Penicillamine is a chelating agent. What it does is clutch copper atoms in its claws and lift them out of the bloodstream before they can damage liver and brain. PCP is a hallucinogen. For God's sake, they *outlawed* PCP back in '63 because it turns you on into schizophrenia. How we even had the formula on hand is going to take a lot of explaining."

Paul settled himself behind the wheel of the Mercury but did not turn the ingnition key. It had to be Kraut's doing. Kraut the program evening an old score for Kraut the dead gangster.

"What happened, pal?"

Paul glared at the phone case on the seat beside him.

"You tell me."

"Simple, pal." Kraut spoke in discrete syllables as to a child or an idiot. "GIGO. Garbage in, garbage out."

With a bolus of fear Paul Felder saw Jimmy Rath's death not only as Kraut getting hunk for the dumping into the garbage can on Broadway in the Thirties but also as an object lesson to Paul Felder now.

12

He swallowed hard as he handed his credit card to the teller.

"I'd like to draw a thousand in twenties on my credit card."

He had to learn how much leeway Kraut allowed him. One grand could give him a good start if he had to run. The phone case hung sweaty in his hand.

"Very good, sir."

The teller pressed a button on the credit card box. Paul saw the reflection of a warning light flash in her eye. She smiled and asked him to wait a moment. He smiled back. She turned away, no doubt discreetly signaling a guard.

Paul looked around casually and whispered fiercely to Kraut.

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"They think I'm working plastic."

"I know. You gonna be good?"

"Yes."

"O.K., kid. Just stay cool."

By the time the guard reached Paul's elbow his credit card had gone off the hot-card list and the teller was making red-faced excuses. Paul smiled stiffly.

"That's quite all right. These things happen. On second thought, I won't be needing the full thousand. Make it two hundred, please."

"We're back in the car?"

They were, but Paul couldn't remember the in-between.

"We are."

"O.K., kid. Don't just sit there. It's out to Long Island again. I'm fixing you up with a motel reservation so we'll be all set to fly to Florida in the morning."

"All right, all right."

"Sore, huh?" Kraut chuckled. "No hard feelings, pal, but see what happens when you get wise, O acned adolescent?"

"Wha'?"

"A slip of the lingo. I meant 'O rash youth.'"

"See what happens when you get fancy?"

"Never mind. The warning stands. I'm telling you: play along with me, you'll be glad; buck me, you'll be sorry."

13

The desk clerk handed him the key with a wink. Still smarting from that assault on his straight manhood, Paul let himself into his room.

A confusion of hair, blue domes of eyelids, a sleeping smile. Mimsy lay very much at home on his bed.

Softly he set the phone case on the folding rack, then moved to the side of the bed and stood looking down. At last he clicked the key against its plastic tag.

She opened an eye a sharper focus of blue, then shut it and stretched her lines felinely. He felt an answering shiver of tingle. Need and doubt weakened his stance. He had to sit and made the most of it by sitting on the bed. He cupped his hand on her breast and felt an answering titillation. She opened both eyes.

"I came right away, Paul. I took the afternoon off and I'm cutting evening class. It feels sinfully good to play hooky."

What was this about coming right away? And how had she found out where he would be staying when he himself had not known till an hour ago? She ran a finger across his lips to stop him from speaking.

"I guess what got me was your cool when I played footsie with you under dear old Florence's innocent eyes and you didn't blink yours one

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time. I just did it to tease to begin with. But then, I don't know, something came over me." She blubbed his lips playfully.

For a minute he didn't know what she was talking about. Then he got the picture of the three of them at the table while nylon toes slid up and down his legs. He laughed. She pushed up on one elbow and stared at him, her eyes suddenly uncertain. He laughed again, but to his own surprise it did not come out a bitter laugh. Her eyes unclouded and she laughed with him.

"Anyway, I made up my mind right after the call to find out about you as well as about myself."

His ears burned; they at least had lost their cool. *Right after the call:* letting him know she had tagged him as the midnight breather. Had she just now laughed not with him but at him? Did she take him for some sort of a creep? She was asking for it. Sock it to her between the eyes.

He got up, not caring how awkwardly, and watched her in the mirror as he undressed. But aside from a widening of the eyes he saw no change in her face. A soft look of lasting wonder, maybe.

"So much for your cool. Boy, did you take me in."

"And vice versa."

"How did it happen?"

"Haven't you heard of love at first sight?"

She punched his shoulder.

"You know what I mean."

He articulated the plastic and aluminum legs.

"Land mine in Vietnam."

"Why didn't you tell me in the car last night?"

"I don't want pity or perversity."

"How do you know you're not getting them now?"

He deployed himself.

"I know."

"You have beautiful long legs."

"My first memory is of wanting to grow tall enough to see what was on the mantel."

"And when you did, what did you find?"

"Dust. Florence isn't the best housekeeper." Mimsy sighed. "She'll be worrying. Do you know how late it is? I have to go." She lay back. "But first you have to keep your promise."

"What promise?"

She wrinkled her nose.

"You know. When you phoned earlier and said those nice things and asked me to come over and promised to tell me who I really am. Most convincing. You made it sound so very mysterious." She thrust out her lower lip. "Unless it was only a hype. Is that what you

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meant: putting me on to do what we did so I'd know myself metaphysically?" She bit his ear. "A shabby trick, darling." She kissed his nose. "But a lovely number." She slipped away from him and legged it to the bathroom to wash and dress.

Paul sent his glower past the foot of the bed to the phone case. Getting an earful? Getting a kick out of the whole thing as well. Kraut the pimp. Harsh thanks for the lovely number, but Kraut had put him on the spot.

Florence had asked him not to tell Mimsy. But everyone had the right to know who she or he was. Mimsy had that basic right. She also had the right to be aware Kraut had used her and might use her again.

When she came out and asked him to zip her up, he told her. He told her about the programs and about the portable phone and showed her the copy of Kraut's ravings. She nodded as she handed the pages back.

"Lots of things make sense now. Not this gibberish. I mean things Florence never wanted to talk about." She surprised Paul by laughing suddenly, richly. "Florence as Mrs. Kraut Schwartz! That'll take some getting used to. I won't tell her I know, of course. This is some wild head change. I used to dream I was secretly a princess, and now I wake up and find I'm Kraut Schwartz's granddaughter. I like the idea." She aimed a finger at Paul. "You cross me, Felder, you fail to make this little girl happy, and you get it right in the guts. Right, gramps?"

Kraut laughed.

"Right, kid. I like the idea too. You got class."

Waiting to see her off in a cab took them out of earshot of Kraut. Paul sandwiches Mimsy's hand in both his.

"We need a way for you to be sure another time it's the real Paul Felder and not gramps who's phoning you."

She thought.

"How about slipping the word 'borogoves' in."

"As in 'All mimsy were the borogoves'?"

"Beamish."

The cab came. He leaned in for a parting kiss and a last word.

"Take care of yourself, Mimsy."

"And you. When will I see you again?"

"Soon, I hope."

She leaned out to call back.

"Pity you don't know what nice things you said on the phone. Maybe I'll tell you some day."

He squeezed his eyes tight.

"How, Kraut?"

"Ain't you doped it out, pal?"

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"You used my voice pattern to make her think I was calling."

His own voice came back at him.

"Exact same voiceprint, kid."

He squeezed his fists tight. He wanted to ask, to shout, *What did you say to her?*

"Why, Kraut?"

"I told you, kid. String along with me and keep your nose clean and you'll be glad. Don't tell me you didn't like it. Why be a chump? Get it where you can and while you can."

"Know something, Kraut? You're mean as a little old lady at a wrestling match. I thought you were thinking big. And here all you've been doing is getting in jabs with an umbrella."

"Say, looka here, kid, I don't know why you're all upset. I thought we was on the same wavelength, seeing you're part artificial like me. Also now there's this other tie, seeing you're almost one of the family."

Paul burned, remembering the phone case had shared the room with them. He opened his eyes and looked around the motel room. Was there no way out of the bind he found himself in? Maybe he could put Kraut himself/itself through an identity crisis.

"Seducing your own granddaughter. Now there's a freaky bit of incest for you."

A moment's silence, then a cold voice.

"Know something, kid? You got a mouth on you."

14

The idea hit him in the middle of the night. But he waited for morning, after Florence left for the supermarket and before Mimsy left for her office-temporary assignment.

"Yes?"

"Mimsy, Mimsy, quite the whimsy, how do your borogoves grow?"

"Ah, the real Paul Felder."

"Listen up, Mimsy. Kraut will be wonderying why it's taking me so long to check out. And if I know him, he'll start feeling around and maybe tapping the pay phones here, or your phone."

"So I'm listening."

"How's your data processing?"

"Fairly advanced. Why?"

"I've been thinking, if you can get up to Boston and tell Prof. Steven Fogarty at Thoreau I say it's O.K. to show you my program — got that so far?"

"My shorthand's fairly advanced too."

"If you do get the chance then, sneak a listening delay into the program. If there's a delayed feedback between what Kraut says and what he hears himself say, he won't be able to speak at all. That

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ought to frustrate him into a breakdown and give us a shot at regaining control." He grew aware that he lacked feedback. "Hello?"

He was talking into a dead line.

15

Matt Muldoon looked hopefully at Paul Felder.

"Cold up north?"

The lie would harm no one.

"Some of the lion leaped over from March. It was raw out this morning."

Matt Muldoon's face took a happy twist down around Killarney. He had found Muldoon where the lady in the next trailer had said Muldoon would be. Muldoon sat at a table under a beach umbrella down by the wading end of the pool, drawing out his canned draft beer. Muldoon's smile faded.

"Still I kind of miss it. Not the place so much, the times. In those days we had the lead all set up in type. 'Gang guns blazed again today and...' But I guess things weren't the way we remember them, the way we like to think they were. Like one time I pointed out to Kraut an old guy eating clams and celery at Shanley's. 'Yeah?' Kraut says. 'Who's that?' 'Bat Masterson,' I tell him. 'You're still not telling me nothing,' he says. And so I have to explain that Bat Masterson had been a great gunfighter in the Old West. Kraut eyed him again. 'Yeah? He don't look so much.' And he didn't. Come to think of it, neither did Kraut."

Paul eyed the phone case at his feet and tried to damp a shudder. He had boarded the plane only after Kraut had promised him not to touch Muldoon. But what were Kraut's easy promises worth?

Muldoon was talking.

"They're all gone now, all those who had some connection with Kraut. Or going fast." He ticked them off on blunt fingers. "S. Thomas Extrom and Gordon Dumaine. Peggy Aaron. Tommy Tighe. Jake Putterman. Judge Barsky. Dallas Dollard. His sister Molly and his wife Florence I don't know about. PWU — present whereabouts unknown. Probably dead. Same goes for Letha Root. Leaves only Macie Devlin and his Faith Venture. And of course Harry Spector. Funny how Max Flesher died the other day and almost at the same time Mark Nolan."

"Mark Nolan?"

Muldoon tapped the copy of Kraut's ravings before him on the table.

"Sgt. Nolan, the guy who questioned Kraut as he lay dying. Came across it only this morning in the Miami paper. Small item. Seems Nolan was setting the night alarm system in the bank where he worked as a guard. Just getting

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ready to go home. Some kind of short circuit electrocuted him. He went to his long home."

Paul did not tell him about Mort Lesser and Jimmy Rath.

"Boy, I sure know how to spread the gloom, don't I, Felder? Sorry about the necrology, but that's what you get for looking up an old bastard like me. The gap-tooth generation. Let's get on to something lighter, like Kraut's deathbed spiel."

Muldoon laughed and pointed.

"This 3903 in '3909 stained-glass windows'—know what that is? Didn't think you would. When Al Smith was running for President, anti-Catholics or just plain good Republicans would ask, 'Do you know Al Smith's phone number? Here, I'll write it down.' They'd write 3909, then tell you to turn the paper back to front and hold it to the light. Get it? POPE. Direct line to the Vatican is what they meant."

He read on and shook his head.

"'Olive Eye' I never figured out."

Explaining it to him would have meant telling him about Mort Lesser. Paul kept silent.

"Now 'A roof without visible means of support' I know. After Kraut dropped out of school he was a newsboy for a year, then a grocery store clerk till he got canned, then a composition roofer's apprentice. From the time he was seventeen he kept paying roofer's union dues to show arresting officers his card as proof of gainful employment.

"He also told me, 'I once worked in your racket.' He said he had been a printer's devil for a while. I guess that's how come he knew about the accents acute and grave he mentions in this nuttiness.

"Then he began his real career. He boosted packages off delivery trucks, looted stores, broke into apartments, stuck up crap games that wouldn't pay for protection. For a while he drove a beer truck for Arnold Rothstein, the bank-roller for the underworld. Then he went into business for himself.

"That's where 'the doctor' comes in — the 'big con man' of 'Fairfield, Conn.' That has to be Dr. S. Thomas Extrom. Extrom always seemed to me one of those ham actors who listens to his voice instead of to the words, to *how* he's saying instead of *what* he's saying. He wore his overcoat like an opera cape. *Die Fledermaus.* But the world took him for philanthropist, yachtsman, financier, country squire, even Presidential dark horse.

"Yet he and Gordon Dumaine, the treasurer of O'Harmon & Foster, were really the Spitale brothers, with long records as con men till the records disappeared from the files. It was S. Thomas

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who got them into the big time. He had vision. He saw Prohibition coming and took over O'Harmon & Foster, a slipping but legitimate drug firm.

"O'Harmon & Foster got withdrawal permits for alcohol to manufacture its products. Bootleggers' trucks, including Krauts, rolled up to the platform of O'Harmon & Foster in Fairfield, Conn., at night to load barrels of hair tonic, furniture polish, and tincture of iodine that the bootleggers distilled into '8-year-old rye,' 'bottled-in-bond bourbon,' and 'Scotch just off the boat.'

Muldoon shuddered.

"I can still taste the stuff."

He washed the taste away with a swallow of beer.

"On with the show and tell. 'Jafsie' I'm sure you know. This next seems to have to do with switching to the numbers game when Repeal liquidated bootlegging. The 'high yeller' would be Letha Root, Harlem's policy queen. Kraut muscled her and all the other black operators out and himself in. Two million bucks a year that meant to him.

"'Everything works by push or pull.' That's something Tommy Tighe used to say. He was Tammany district leader and Kraut's bagman, paying off the cops, the politicians, and the judges and prosecutors.

"From 'Mr. Black has the Limehouse Blues' to, let's see, 'Tip your derby to a horseshoe wreath' has to do with the time Schwartz hid out in Peggy Aaron's house. The Limey, Vic Hazell, worked as a triggerman for Kraut, then decided he wanted part or all of the action for himself. He declared war by raiding Kraut's garage, smashing everything he found there — slot machines, beer rack, trucks — all but twenty cases of booze, which he hauled away after killing a mechanic who begged for his life.

"In the war with the Limey the kill ratio favored Kraut — but how can you outwit a mad dog? And Hazell was a mad dog. He went looking for Kraut personally after Kraut's hoods killed Hazell's kid brother. One day on East 107th, Kraut spotted Tommy gun muzzles sticking out of a black touring car. Kraut dove for the pavement. Kids were playing under spouting fire hydrants when the Limey sprayed the whole damn street trying to get Kraut. Five kids wounded, one dead.

"Sol Barsky — later Judge Barsky and a righteous tough judge — got Hazell off by tripping up a prosecution witness. The cops had tried too hard to cinch the case against Hazell with a little white perjury.

"Anyway, with Hazell running loose, Schwartz lay low as a 'Mr.

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Black' at Peggy Aaron's, while hoods he hired from Chicago hunted Hazell. The Limey got riddled taking a set-up phone call. As I remember, he was all of twenty-four. I met Peggy in later years, and she told me Kraut pushed her and her girls around for the fun of it. Still, she felt nostalgia for the old days. She said she ran into one of her girls after her place broke up. 'It was safer in my house,' she said. 'The poor girl got pregnant swimming in a public swimmming pool.'

"The tramp buttering his bread with sunlight could be Chaplin, though I don't recall that bit of business in any of his films. But here's Jake Putterman, a guy with moxie. 'Jamaica ginger' — Jake for short. 'Leading the blind in his soup and fish,' and so on. Jake was a Waiters Union officer who fought back when Kraut set up the Gotham Restaurant and Cafeteria Association to squeeze protection money. Stink bombs during lunch and dinner hours. Death threats. They didn't faze Jake, though local law enforcement was no help.

"The New York grand jury, convened to investigate racketeering under the direction of the D.A., couldn't find any rackets. A series of stories appeared in the *N.Y. Evening Globe,* detailing the rackets. The grand jury subpoenaed the newspaperman, but yours truly refused to reveal his source. The grand jury had me taken before the general sessions judge. Fined me 250 bucks and 30 days for contempt." Muldoon smiled. "Wasn't too bad. I got a jail expose series out of the vile durance.

"But now things began to break. It was the beginning of the end for Kraut Schwartz. The governor appointed a special prosecutor. My source — Jake Putterman — brought the special prosecutor evidence tying Schwartz to Tommy Tighe, the Tammany district leader who was Kraut's fixer. Kraut beat it out of the state and waited for the heat to die down.

"Funny how he skips around in his delirium. Here we go back a few years. Once I put in the paper that Kraut was a pushover for a blonde. He came up to me and asked, 'Did you write that, Muldoon?' I had to say I did. He shook his head. 'Is that any language for a family newspaper?' But he did have a yen for blondes. Florence, of course. And then there was Dallas Dollard, the dame who ran her own speak-easy. She wouldn't give him a tumble. Here she is in 'Throw the bitch out. It's curtains, sister. A cotton ball in hell.' Her chorus girls had an act in which they threw tiny cotton balls at the suckers. I was there when she was rehearsing a new show. She had a routine in

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which a guy playing a repairman asked, 'Would you like a French phone?' and she answered, 'But I don't speak French.' A voice came from a dark corner of the room. 'You can French me anytime.' She located her heckler by the red glow of a cigar, and she yelled, 'Throw the bum out!' It was Kraut. He turned down her apology and got her place padlocked, and she never dared show her face in New York after that.

"But 'F for fig' and the rest I don't get, unless it was the G-string Dallas's chorus girls wore, and maybe 'J for jig' has to do with Harlem again, and 'J for John the Waterman' might be Schwartz's Waterman pen he used to rap the mouthpiece with to annoy wire-tappers: that this made it just as hard on whoever he was talking to didn't faze him, and 'N for knucklebones' could stand for brass knuckles, and 'S for sack of stones' might be a cement kimono for somebody he dropped in the East River.

"Now the mention of a trunk reminds me. The story went that Schwartz had somebody build him an iron chest and that Schwartz filled it with big bills and jewelry. I heard that it held the diamonds and rubies from Broadway's biggest jewelry store heist. The word was Schwartz agreed to fence the stuff then sent a triggerman after the guys who pulled it off to gun them down and bring back the dough Schwartz had paid for the stuff."

Matt Muldoon eyed the nose shadow of a sunbather.

"Four p.m. Time for my dip. Finished on the dot." He handed the pages back to Paul and stood up on skinny shanks. "Join me? I'll fix you up with a pair of trunks, and we can both impregnate the swimming pool."

Paul smiled and shook his head but went down to the edge with Muldoon. He waited at the deep end for Muldoon to snort and splutter up and out. He braced himself and lent a hand to a mottled hand.

"Be careful the next few days." He looked across the pool to the phone case resting by Muldoon's table. "And you'll think I'm nuts, but when we get back say something nice about Kraut."

Muldoon stared at him, then a few drops fell with a shrug.

"Too much sun too soon?" Muldoon frowned searchingly at the sunbathers at the far side of the pool, then back at Paul. "Why not? I always humor nuts."

And toweling himself at his table, Muldoon spoke to the world at large.

"Once I asked Schwartz if he ever did business with Lucky Luciano or Chink Sherman.

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Schwartz said, 'I may do a lot of lousy things, but I'll never live off dames or dope.' In his way Schwartz was quite a guy."

He looked at Paul for approval. Paul nodded; he hoped that had bought Muldoon protection.

16

Paul made out to be taking a sponge bath in his motel room and with the water running sneaked out to a pay phone.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Florence Bogen?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Paul Felder. Is Mimsy there?"

"No."

"Do you know where she is?"

"I really can't say. She wasn't here when I came home this evening. She left a note. It said she had a wonderful assignment traveling as a secretary to an executive on a flying trip across the country. I checked with the business school, and they said she canceled her classes for the rest of the week for the same reason. It sounded like a good thing, but frankly I was worried till you called. The office-temporary place is closed at this hour, and I can't find out anything from a recording. I thought you and Mimsy might have— But now I'm not worried."

Now *he* was worried. The assignment sounded phony. Had Mimsy given up after his aborted call, and had Kraut requisitioned her out of the way? Or had Mimsy faked it, setting out on her unprepared own to deal with Kraut in Boston?

His heart sank to the bottom of the slot with the coins for a second call.

Professor Steven Fogarty hardly listened.

"Girl? No, I haven't met your girl. Sorry, Paul, you caught me at a bad time. I'm late already. Faculty meeting. Cutting up the pie for the coming semester. I really have to run now. Try me again later this week or early next."

That was bad enough. Worse was wondering if that had been Professor Steven Fogarty or Kraut mimicking Fogarty's voice.

17

Letha Root was blind but she *glared* at him.

"Be he live or be he dead, I don't want nothing to do with him nohow, that's the guaranteed truth."

Time had sharpened further the already sharp features of the high-yellow policy queen of Harlem in the Thirties.

Paul found himself laying a soul brother accent on her.

"Won't take but a minute of your time, sister."

In the silence the hall funneled the refrigerator humming and the

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wires in a toaster and the loose lid of a pot on a burner humming along. Someone in the kitchen opened and closed the refrigerator door, and Paul heard the interfacing of beer and air.

Madame Root shook her head.

"My interest in Kraut Schwartz died when he died. But I ain't no ways sorry for the wire I sent old Kraut at the Newark Hospital when I hear he's at death's door. 'Galatians 6:7' is all I said. If you don't know your Bible, that's 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' Too bad he never came to enough to know about the wire."

Paul felt the phone case join in the humming. Kraut knew now.

"Makes you stop and wonder, don't it, sister, how it all come out like the Good Book say."

"F'get you, honky."

Letha Root turned her blankness on the mustachioed tall stud in tie-dyed levi's and high-heeled shoes.

"Why, what you mean, Junior?"

"He hyping you, Aunty. This ain't no member. He only got a contact habit bloodwise. You just as well stop running your mouth." Without taking his eyes off Paul, he drained his beer and set the can down. "Whupping the game on a lame. I'm gonna go up side your head."

Letha Root put out a hand.

"He don't mean no harm, honey. My jaws ain't tight. If a white boy can put me on like that, he must have *some* soul in him. You leave him be." She felt the crystalless face of her lapel watch. "It's getting on, Junior. You better be on your way to your job."

Junior looked sullenly out the window at Paul's rental Caddy. His mood shifted to indifference. He was doing his number: his number was to look bored; it put the world on the defensive.

"If you think you know what you doing."

He gave Aunty an unnephewlike kiss. She gave him a fond slap.

"Oh, yeah. Get on out of here, you old greasy greens."

He got on out without a backward look at Paul.

Madame Root got herself and Paul settled down.

"Reckon you can tell I bought myself a nephew. He works at a soul station I own here. Oh, yes, I got out of New York with just enough to buy me a new start. Old Kraut didn't wipe me out quite. I liked the climate out here — it was hotter in New York, you dig — but back when I hit Las Vegas, they weren't letting blacks move in. So I got me a white woman to front for me and bought this house. I made out to be the maid. Lots of folks think she left it to me in her will.

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"All right, white boy. You flew all the way out here to see me. Read me what old Kraut said. Maybe I'll know and maybe I won't. Maybe I'll tell and maybe I won't. What you waiting on? Do I have a witness out there?"

She didn't stop him till he reached "5 to 7 made them Darktown Strutters bawl. Even the high yeller." Her face took on even greater sharpness, and she put up a halting hand.

"That old devil Kraut. 527 was the magic number done all us Harlem operators in. Everybody knowed 527 always get a big play in November. That because 5 plus 2 is lucky 7 and November the 11th month. Seven-come-eleven the idea. Well, old Kraut got his walking adding machine — what his name?"

"Zigzag Ludwig?"

"That it. Kraut got Zigzag to figure how to rig the pari-mutuel handle with a few bets at the race track to make 527 hit on Thanksgiving Eve, 19 and 31. That broke all the black-run policy banks, and old Kraut moved in."

She stopped him again at "The man and the woman have a fortune in potatoes. It's Big Dick —"

"Dream-book talk. 'Man and woman' mean 15, 'fortune' mean 60, and 'potatoes' — that stand for something else you can guess — mean 75. In craps Big Dick stand for 10, in lottery Big Dick 15-60-75."

She had but one comment more, and that at the end.

"What old Kraut doing messing around with the Bible? Fetch me my copy down off yonder shelf and turn to Genesis 3:14 and read me it.".

"'And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.'"

She listened and nodded.

"Look like old Kraut crapped out with snake eyes."

Letha Root stood at the door of her home still laughing as Paul crossed slabs set in trim lawn and got into the Caddy.

Once safely on the passenger seat with the car starting up, Kraut spoke.

"We're getting there, kid. I'll lay odds when you dig up the iron chest holding the loot there'll be a combination padlock on the hasp and the combination will be Big Dick — 15-60-75. O.K., kid. On to L.A."

Looking in the mirror to make a U-turn back toward the airport, Paul met eyes.

Junior rose higher and leaned forward to take in the phone case. He flicked open a knife. Its

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wickedness held Paul still while Junior reached over to snap the case open and study its innards. Junior got his rump on the back seat and lounged, cleaning his fingernails with the knife.

"Suppose you drive me to my place of work. We-all got things to talk over."

In the broadcasting studio Junior's number changed. Now, sitting at his mikes and switches and wearing earphones, he was the up-tempo soul-station disc jockey supreme.

"Hello-o-o: lucky people you, this is your Toke Show host...the Splendiferous Spade. You know I ain't S-in and J-ing you: pretty people, I'm cuing you. For the next two solid hours...and I mean solid...I'll be taking requests. So you be phoning them in, hear?" He mixed in loud drum rim-shots, trumpet flourishes, and band chords sustained to punctuate his shucking and jiving, gave the phone number, put on a piece full of funky runs, lit, sucked on, and passed to Paul a joint in a peace-symbol roach clip, and leaned back with his earphones half on half off. "Now, man, don't hold back."

He followed Paul's gaze to the desk phone and smiled.

"I fixed the station phone line to give callers the busy signal. I have me a backlog of requests on tape — my goof-off insurance. Shoot, man, we're alone and won't nobody bother us."

The light on the desk phone lit up.

Junior frowned and lifted the phone. Paul could hear Kraut's voice.

"Please play 'If I Forget You.' I'd like to dedicate it to the memory of Kraut Schwartz, which is a long memory."

The voice went on but grew so faint that Junior had to press the earpiece hard to his head to hear. Then came an ear-splitting sound that shimmered the air and set Paul's teeth on edge. Junior slumped slowly after the jolt hit him. Junior was alive but his face was dead. Paul looked at Junior's eyes and did not want to know what the sound had done to Junior's brain.

Kraut spoke from the phone case.

"Now if you get the hell out of there, kid, we won't miss our flight after all."

18

"Mr. Devlin?"

"Yes."

"Macie Devlin?"

"The same."

Macie Devlin's voice was easy, but his eyes held a wariness that went against the voice.

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"My name is Paul Felder." Paul spoke over the electric hedge trimmer sounding from the side of the redwood house. He had nearly tripped on its damn trailing cord. "I'm doing a paper on Kraut Schwartz and —"

He stopped, wondering at Macie Devlin's quick warning headshake. The hedge trimmer's whine grew.

"Faith, no!"

Paul whirled without thinking. He tripped himself. The phone case flew from his hand. The ground stunned him. All he saw of the woman rushing him was a floppy white hat and rhinestoned dark glasses. She was leaning over him before he could move. The vibrating saw blade thrust down at his throat.

His hands were broken-winged birds. One flailing hand touched a tremble of line. He caught hold of the cord and whipped it at the blade. The blade sliced through to a flaring crackle that shocked the woman backward.

Paul rolled over into a painful push-up. Even stilled, the blade made a wicked weapon. But by now Macie Devlin had an arm around the woman; his other hand gently pulled the trimmer from her grip and let it fall.

"She's all right now."

Devlin walked her to the front door. She stiffened in the opening and her legs locked. Macie Devlin looked back over his shoulder.

"She's afraid for me, you see. Only a few years ago some of the boys snatched me and tried to make me tell them where to find Albert's mythical buried fortune." He gave a short laugh. "Hell, if I knew where it was, I'd've told the government more'n forty years ago, right after Albert died. The informer's share alone would've made me rich."

He stroked the woman's cheek. "This young fellow won't harm me, dearest. Please go in and take your beauty nap." He kissed her neck.

Her still-showgirl legs unlocked and she dimmed away. Macie Devlin closed the door and turned back to Paul. With a weak smile he fingered sweat from his brow and snapped the drops off.

"Paul Felder is it? Let's have a change of venue, Paul."

A half-size refrigerator stood in a corner of Devlin's downtown real-estate management office. Macie Devlin opened it and poured himself a glass of skim milk. Paul shook his head at a hospitable eyebrow. Devlin took distasteful sips.

"Disbarred by an ulcer, as well as by the bar association. Plus high cholesterol level. Plus an implanted pacemaker. My list of infirmities is a long one. But as the fellow said,

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when you consider the alternative."

He pointed to the fixtures for a neon sign that had hung in the window.

"The neon sign had to go. It could make my pacemaker pulse so fast my heart couldn't keep up. My heart would stop or just twitch." He lifted his head away from bodily pain. "Yes, they worked me over and my heart gave out and they left me for dead. In a way my bum ticker is my insurance. They know it's no use any more trying to get at me through Faith or by working me over again. I'd only stop on them. But you came here to talk about Albert."

Smiling, he leafed through the copy of Kraut's ravings.

"So you consider Kraut Schwartz literature. That would've thrilled Albert. His favorite reading was Emil Ludwig's — no relation to Zigzag — *Life of Napoleon. The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* also impressed him. After reading it he said, 'Them days you could knock off hundreds without getting in no jam.'

"For a while he went on a culture binge. I guided him through the musuems, brought him art books. 'The Thinker is a question mark.' He pointed out to me that in left profile Rodin's *Thinker is* a question mark. He even began to be a natty dresser, because Society" —Macie Devlin formed finger quotes in the air around the word— "took him up. Then he saw Society did it only for kicks, and he went back to his sloppy self."

A moving van pulled up out front, and the driver came in for a key. Macie Devlin beamed as the man went out.

"Full occupancy maketh a full hearth. I just rented the office the other side of this wall to a doctor. That's his equipment they're moving in. But about Albert. I see he picked up some Pennsylvania Dutch from his stay. 'Just walk the fly door in. The hook ain't on.' 'I'm afraid you don't make yourself out.' 'Just before you get the farm behind, go the hill over.' Poor Albert. He nearly went mad holed up for eighteen months while he was under indictment. He *did* go mad."

Macie Devlin eyed Paul speculatively.

"I've paid my dues. After Albert died I got off with one year for turning state's evidence and giving the special prosecutor the goods on Tommy Tighe. I don't want to pay any more dues. There's no statute of limitations on murder. That goes for being accessory thereto, however unwittingly or unwillingly. So what I'm about to tell you is purest supposition.

"Suppose someone journeyed to Albert's hideout to tell Albert this

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someone had fixed it up for Albert to give himself up in Nyack, New York. This someone might have watched Albert shift moods — from gloom to joy to savagery. Suppose further that after agreeing to return to civilization, Albert in this strangely savage mood picked a fight with his favorite bodyguard, Slip Katz. Albert loved horseback riding, and Katz used to bounce along with him. But say that now Albert seemed to work himself into a rage.

"Say that Albert cursed Katz out, accusing him of holding out a collection on him — 'playing the nine of hearts on me.' Say that Albert suddenly drew from a handy drawer a .45 with a silencer on it and silenced Katz. Say Albert sent this someone downstairs to fetch a pair of young hoods. Say Albert told one of the hoods to stand still and then bloodied his nose. 'And let the blood to drown the blood.' This would account for the blood on the floor as having come from a fight over cards, if the boarding-house keeper wondered. Say the two hoods stuffed Katz's body into a burlap sack, weighted the sack with chunks of cement—'The cat's pajamas, a kitten kimono' — and dumped it in some abandoned rain-pooled stone quarry."

Macie Devlin's eyes looked haunted.

"'Boys, throw your voice!' You found that ad in the pulp magazines. A cut of an eye-popping porter toting a trunk which emitted the cry, 'Help, help, let me out!' To get you to send away for ventriloquism lessons. Of course all this never happened, but I get a picture of the hoods carrying the sack down the back stairs while Katz still had a bit of life in him."

Paul felt a prickle of insight. *Would I kid you, captain?* Katz had helped Kraut secretly bury the iron trunk full of loot. Like Captain Kidd, Kraut had got rid of a too-knowing henchman.

Macie Devlin seemed anxious to wind it up.

"So much for fantasy. I can tell you only one fact. When Albert gave himself up in Nyack, a small town in Rockland County, I got him to create a new image of himself. Mr. Albert Rabinow walked around town smiling humbly, tipping his hat to the ladies, and patting kids' heads. His people tipped bigger than government people, who were on a tight budget. It was children's parties for hospitalized and orphaned kids and drinks for everyone in the house. 'Cain was I ere I saw Nyack.'

"The jury acquitted him. The judge bawled the jury out. 'The verdict was dictated by other considerations than the evidence.' But though Albert beat the tax evasion rap, the special rackets

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prosecutor, with Jake Putterman's help, kept after him. Albert proposed that the syndicate rub out the special prosecutor.

"The Big Six vetoed the hit because it would've put too much heat on the whole underworld. 'I'm gunning for the guy myself. Egged them on but they chickened out.' Albert sent word he planned to go ahead with the rubout. The syndicate gave Harry Spector the contract, and Albert met his Waterloo in the Tivoli's loo."

"Did you ever meet Harry Spector?"

"Never laid eyes on the chap. Never want to. Show you what I mean. He served twenty-three years after they got him for Albert's killing. Just a year before he got out, Harry Spector was the only prisoner to show up for his meals when the inmates at Rahway went on a mass hunger strike. A lot of hard-noses there, but none of the other prisoners made a move to bother Harry Spector."

He handed Paul Kraut's ravings and Paul put them away and got up.

"Drive you back home?"

"No, thanks, young fellow. I have to stay here and see everything's unpacked and set up, ready for the doctor to practice when he shows Monday." He smiled. "I haven't met this chap either, but his credit and references check out tiptop. He's moving down from upstate, and we've arranged everything by phone."

They shook hands and parted outside Macie Devlin's office. Something nagging at him, Paul left slowly. He had not yet gone outside when a he heard a thump and a yell.

In the doctor's office Paul found Macie Devlin on the floor. The moving man waved his hands.

"I was just plugging this machine in when I heard him fall and I turned around and there he was like that."

Paul whistled softly when he saw Macie Devlin lay within three feet of a diathermy machine for simple surgery such as removing warts. Like a neon sign, a diathermy machine would make a pacemaker race unbeatably.

The moving man repeated himself. Paul cut him off and told him to use Devlin's phone to bring an ambulance.

Paul lowered himself to give mouth-to-mouth. But it was no good. He raised himself stiffly as the ambulance attendant, with a headshake that said it would be no good, took over.

He looked around before he left. He knew before looking roughly what he would find. The name on the packing cases was Dr. O.E. Black. Kraut Schwartz.

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19

He knew what he would find before he found it in the Miami and Vegas papers he picked up in the L.A. air terminal. Kraut had removed other warts.

The swimming pool at Mobile Haven had an automatic chlorinator that kept the chlorine residual from dropping below .3 ppm by feeding chlorine gas into the water in continuous doses to kill algae and bacteria. The occasionally necessary booster shots of superchlorination took place only when no one was in the pool. At 4 p.m. on the day following Paul's talk with ex-newsman Matt Muldoon, a sudden uncalled-for surge of superchlorination left those in the pool at the time — two adults and three children — in critical condition. One of the adults was Matt Muldoon.

Letha Root's home had gone up in flames — the fire marshal warned the public again about the danger of overloading electrical circuits — at the same time a local celebrity of the same address, Johnson Jones a.k.a. the Splendiferous Spade, had suffered a seizure or stroke on the air. The Las Vegas paper noted the coincidence and drew a moral for mortal man.

Paul looked back along the spoor of warts. It still beat him how Kraut had pulled off the killing of Mort Lesser. Maybe it had been an ordinary holdup after all. No. More likely it had been payment for Kraut's tip — real or phony? — to some underworld figure that Max Flesher was a canary.

Paul looked ahead through the plane window. Somewhere there should be a nice clean universe. It would be true of all the inhabitants thereof that their guts take a Moebius twist or their large intestine is a Klein bottle — *ein klein nachtgeschirr* — so that they deposit the results of digestion in this our own less nice universe. Somewhere and sometime in infinity there had to be a nice clean universe. The laws of chance said they couldn't *all* crap out.

20

"We're coming down the home stretch, kid."

Paul believed Kraut. They had deplaned in Philadelphia and were rolling through countryside in line with Kraut's analysis.

"I hid out in Pennsylvania Dutch country. 'Zook and ye shall find.' Zook is a Pennsylvania Dutch name. 'Where was Moses when the lights went out?' 'And Pharaoh believed Pharaoh's daughter.' In the Thirties the 4:44 was a Delaware Lackawan' — 'the Road of Anthracite' — train that with a changeover to the Reading brought you to Egypt, Pa. According to tax records, the Zook family ran a

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boardinghouse just outside Egypt. The house is uninhabited but standing. Probably still a faded sign on the barn. 'They put a whammy on the barn.' 'Zook and ye shall find.'"

They drove north in humming silence a while, then Kraut broke in on a mind seething with wild schemes. Could he blow up Kraut's microwave links? Or turn the microwaves back against Kraut? Or had he waited too long, hoping once he had his hands on the ten megabucks he could buy distance and time? Maybe a computer to fight back with. Damn. Damn. Damn. He would find a way to save Mimsy and himself.

"Kid. Hey, kid!"

A note of urgency came through Kraut's high spirits.

"Yes?"

"I been thinking, kid. Remember that scrap of paper we got from Max Flesher? The one with the X on it and the spots of my blood?"

"Yes?"

"That blood is all the cellular material left of me. I think I could analyze it and clone a lot of Krauts out of that blood. So how's about putting it in a safe place for me. Stop off at Bethlemen, say, and leave it in a bank vault."

Just what the world needed. An army of Krauts.

Paul drew one-handed the slip of paper from his billfold.

"That? Didn't I tell you? We lost that way back during the mugging right after we left Max Flesher."

A long silence, then, "Oh. Too bad, kid. It would of been nice."

"Yes, it would've been really something."

Paul pressed the dashboard lighter, and when it popped he touched the glow to the scrap of paper and watched the army of Krauts curl into ash in the tray.

It was all open country, empty country. He saw no one to see him pry the boards off the front door of the Zook house and let himself in. Dust was the only furnishing. He climbed the stairs. The roomiest guest room would have been Kraut's. He barely made out the nothingness. He raised the window with hurting blows of the heel of his hand and shoved boards away on squeaking nails.

Dark light showed a dim stain on the floor. Katz's blood, in wine-stained light. The violet of the pane came of many years of sunlight tinting the colloidal solution of manganese in the glass. *The violent end of the spectrum.* The window gave on the neighboring field. It was not a field but a graveyard. *Acutely aware every prognosis is grave.*

He retrieved the phone case at the door.

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"We're down to the wire, Kraut."

Kraut did not answer.

"The barn *does* have a faded hex sign, Kraut."

Still no answer.

He crunched along the cinder path leading to the barn, then veered away through weeds toward the graveyard. He set the phone case down and leaned on the fence. A weather-withered wreath, "Xmas in Heaven," seemed the sole remains of recent remembrance. The name Auer on a headstone struck him like lightning. *I feel my hour coming. The golden hour of the little flower.* The X he had reduced to ashes in the tray of the car had been a mnemonic hourglass. The treasure had to be in the Auer grave.

His smile gave way to gravity. Why was Kraut so all-banked silent? His smile triumphed. He would keep Kraut guessing in return. He straightened to turn and go back for the new shovel and pick he had stowed in the rental Stingray. The barn door creaked open without wind. A man stepped out of the darkness bringing some of it with him. Paul caught glints off a car in the barn.

But another glint took his eye. Big hands hung low on thick arms from heavy shoulders. In one of those hands a gun held steady on Paul.

When he killed Kraut, Harry Spector had been Paul Felder's age. He would be 65 now. The man looked a hard, fit 65. A killer. Once you knew, it stuck out all over him.

Paul spoke out of the side of his mouth away from the man.

"Here comes Harry Spector, Kraut. He has a gun."

No response. Why the hell wasn't Kraut sending the note of fear that had made the muggers break and run?

"Kraut!"

No answer was the answer. Kraut had double-crossed him. A trap for Spector, Paul the bait. Paul smiled at Spector.

"What did he tell you that brought you all the way out here?"

Spector halted a man's length from Paul.

"What do you mean he?" For God's sake, he had modeled himself on Edward G. Robinson. "What are you pulling, Felder — if that's your right moniker? Think I don't make the voice?"

"Just wanted to make sure it was you."

So Kraut had used that gimmick again. But what had Paul's voice told Spector? Kraut's iron trunk had been a legend in Kraut and Spector's day. Greed. *I hear a siren coming but he goes back into the john.* A killer who risked his getaway to roll the dying: damn well had to be greed. And

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greed would make Spector kill Paul to keep the whole of the loot. Right now greed meant impatience.

"I got the connections to fence the jewels and wash the money. You say the stuff's here. So let's get on with the deal."

"Is it all right if I...?" Paul mimed picking up the phone case. He answered narrowing eyes. "Metal detector. It'll tell us where to dig."

The gun gestured O.K. "But don't make no bull moves."

Yet a mad move seemed the only one to make, and make now, before the loot came to light. He couldn't jump Spector. He had to walk straight into the gun, counting on greed to keep Spector from shooting to kill. Paul braced himself and forged ahead, with a yell. Spector froze for an eye blink, then fired at Paul's right knee. The hammer blow rocked Paul, but he swung another step forward. Spector stared, then fired at Paul's left knee. The hammer blow staggered Paul again, but he remained upright and forged on.

Spector backed a step, then held, his eyes fixing on the phone case swinging from Paul's hand. He smiled. Paul read the thought. The "metal detector" could do all the talking Spector needed. The muzzle lifted to center on Paul's chest. Spector's mouth opened in empathy.

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"You asked for it, kid."

But the phone case was already flying. It knocked the gun arm aside long enough for Paul to get in and put all he had into one karate chop.

The car in the barn blared its radio.

"All-points bulletin. Be on the lookout for a tan '70 Chevy or a red '74 Stingray. The driver is Harry Spector, 65, white male, wanted for the murder of one Paul Felder at the old Zook homestead east of Egypt. This man is armed and dangerous."

Then Kraut spoke from the phone case on the ground beside the fallen Spector.

"Hear that, Harry? I'm putting that out on the police band. Shoot me in the back, would you?" The voice jumped up and down in glee. "Harry, you been out too long. I'm sticking you in for another 23 years."

Paul went limp. He drew shuddering breaths that he took to be sobbing till the true sobbing overrode him.

The sobbing was a woman's and the voice was Mimsy's.

"What did you do to him, gramps? If I'm too late and you've killed him, damn you, gramps, so help me I'll wipe you out."

Paul found his own voice and spoke to the phone case.

"Mimsy."

"Paul! You're all right! You're all right?...It *is* you?"

"Ten thousand borogoves, yes. Where are you?"

"Boston. Thoreau. Gramps cut us off before I could get what you were driving at, remember? So I had to go ahead on my own. I told Elorence I Knew All, and I got her to play dumb when you called — because you might've been gramps. And I made her tell me everything she could about gramps. One thing stuck in my mind. It seems he had a thing about literature.

"I thought a good dose of modern American lit might change his personality. For the better: it couldn't for the worse. So I came up here and talked myself into access — Steve is a doll — and —"

"It's 'Steve,' is it?"

"Eat your heart out. And I fed gramps Bellow, Mailer, Roth, Gold, Malamud...But when I listened in to the readout just now, I thought I was too late."

Kraut's voice broke in. Kraut's and yet not Kraut's. Kraut's with an inflection of Kraut's sister Molly Moldover.

"Paulele, you poor boy, you've been through a bad time. So find a good restaurant quick and have some hot chicken soup already."

By God, the computer program was a Jewish mother.

Mimsy's voice came in loud and clear: "Hurry to me, Paul."

He heard another faraway siren.

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Intellectuals try to cope with their anxiety by telling each other atrocity stories about America...What is the consequence? A stiffening of spines? A clearing of the mind and will for action? I doubt it...People who tell such stories are, unconsciously, seeking to create a climate which will justify in their own minds the concessions they are making.

—David Reisman, *Individualism Reconsidered*, MacMillan (The Free Press), pp. 124-7

...radical movements are always plagued with people who want to lose...want in effect to be put under protective custody.

—Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Beacon Press, p. 122

In the 1950's somebody defined urban renewal as "replacing Negroes with trees," and I'm beginning to think that in the same way too many typical science fiction horror stories are not the universal dystopias they pretend to be, but rather the unhappy wails of privilege-coming-to-and-end. Take, for example, the usual Overpopulation Story, in which Americans have to live without private ranch houses, or the typical Pollution Story, in which far too often the real gripe is that "we" must subsist on soybeans and vegetable starch (as if the vast majority of the

JOANNA RUSS

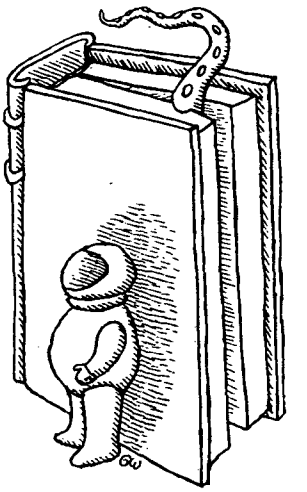
Books

Bad Moon Rising, ed. Thomas Disch, Harper & Row, $6.95

Paradox Lost, Frederic Brown, Random House, $5.95

The Star Road, Gordon Dickson, Doubleday, $5.95

Complex Man, Marie Farca, Doubleday, $5.95



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human race since the Bronze Age hadn't been doing just that) or the Violence Story which deplores the fact (as someone recently pointed out) that violence is becoming democratized.

As Thomas Disch, editor of *Bad Moon Rising,* says in his Introduction, science fiction is "a partisan literature" inevitably involved with the didactic because it presents not what exists (about which one can at last pretend to be objective) but what might exist. Like a liberal late Roman Mr. Disch prefaces his collection with the statement that "almost everything is going from bad to worse," but the collection doesn't think so; it is really on the side of the early Christian radicals and so am I. Keep this in mind as I tell you that I judge *Bad Moon* to be a splendid book. It is (by the way) not labeled "science fiction," but a recent article of Samuel Delany's* has convinced me that we're fighting a losing battle *not* in trying to get public recognition of s.f. (which is possible) but in trying to get *the distributors* to let us out of our ghetto. *Bad Moon* will at least be read by people not yet acquainted with science fiction, for most of the book is indeed s.f. and most of it is extraordinarily good.

Not only does *Bad Moon* have a cumulative impact, which is rare among anthologies, but Mr. Disch has managed to split almost all the themes treated into at least two stories, this odd doubleness — the Look Again technique — being the essence of propaganda. Thus we have two stories by George Effinger, one a Kafkaesque tale of Little Man vs. Big Government ("Relatives") that is frankly awful, and another ("Two Sadnesses") which will enchant all lovers of *Winnie the Pooh* and *Wind in the Willows,* though they may find themselves hiding under their beds afterwards. There is a passionate, fully-detailed, well-written New York paranoia story by Harlan Ellison* ("The Whimper of Whipped Dogs") which puts forward the (to my mind, untenable view that violence is caused by Satan or maybe Original Sin; there is a similar, quiet, well-written tale by Charles Naylor ("We Are Dainty Little People") which not only shows you what but why. One might contrast Malcolm Braly's "An Outline of History," an old-fashioned *Analog* tale that not only operates on the village-atheist level but also has (Black) characters

*"*Popular Culture, S-F Publishing, and Poetry: A Letter To a Critic*" Science Fiction Studies, *Spring 1973, pp. 29-43.*

**In West Coast paranoia stories only the police are Bad; in New York City paranoia stories* everybody *is Bad. Needless to say, much paranoia is socially justified, but genre ordinarily evades the why, which is all-important.*

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the author has gotten from bad movies, with Gene Wolfe's "Hour of Trust," which watches the next American revolution from the viewpoint of an expatriate businessman. Mr. Wolfe not only has complicated, real, human characters — although I think he romanticizes his revolutionaries — but he knows the how and why of what's happening. He is the only writer in the book to ask the crucial question "Who profits?" right out loud, and the only one to display a tired, detached sympathy I can only call "European" (because I don't know what to call it, really). Mr. Wolfe's astonishing qualities as a writer now extend to historical analysis; his *raisonneur* is the perfect character, historically speaking, a parasite/jester in the person of an expensive, ironic, intelligent pimp.

Dropping the pairing-up game (which is becoming unmanageable) the best piece of propaganda I have ever read is in this book: Kate Wilhelm's "The Village." It carries its own split; its subject (the war in Southeast Asia) is folded back on itself in a doubleness that *is* the subject of the story. This is the first time I've seen Ms. Wilhelm use the slick-magazine origins of her people and places (not her treatment of them) so savagely and well. The tale, which was written several years ago, was good enough to frighten the slick magazines into rejecting it; only now does it see print. At the same level of effect — and even more frightening now — is Norman Rush's "Riding," a perfect commentary on the quotations at the beginning of this review. Mr. Rush calls it "riding to the trap", i.e. the gallows; it is criticism of the Left (?) made from the Left. (Mr. Rush's other story, "Fighting Fascism," is equally understated and also ironic, but I'm afraid it lost me.) Kit Reed's "In Behalf of the Product" has a somewhat smaller target in view (Miss Wonderful Land of Ours) but covers it very thoroughly indeed, and Carol Emshwiller's "Strangers" is routine Emshwiller, which means very, very good; she has not, as usual, wasted one word. Mr. Disch's own "Everyday Life in the Later Roman Empire" is merely brilliant; it is part of a novel about a future New York City, parts of which have come out lately in various places. This piece is not quite the best, which means (if one can judge by what's already been printed) that the novel will be a stunner. There are also two fine poems by Peter Schjeldahl, "Ho Chi Minh Elegy" and "For Apollo 11," the first New Left, the second hair-raisingly good science fiction. John Sladek's "The Great Wall of Mexico" attacks its subject by way of an eerie, funny, subversive,

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almost-surrealism quite impossible to describe; you may get some of the flavor of it if I tell you that the FBI is using retired Senior Citizens to listen to bugged conversations in public places, and that one of them, loyal as he is, vows after his first two hours' excruciating listening that he will never say anything dull in a public place again.

Marilyn Hacker has two poems, "Elegy for Janis Joplin" and "Untoward Occurrence at Ambassy Poetry Reading," that strike me as not her best; there is a charming but slight pastiche by Ron Padgett and Dick Gallup ("Cold Turkey"), and a bad West Coast paranoia story by Raylyn Moore called "Where Have All the Followers Gone," whose characters are obviously doomed to expire from sheer grubbiness long before they get passed. Michael Moorcock's "An Apocalypse: Some Scenes from European Life" is well-intentioned but awfully clunky, i.e. one of those stories in which people speak translatorese ("Are those the bad soldiers, Mother?" "No, Karl, they are the good soldiers. They are freeing Paris of those who have brought the city to ruin") and—as in bad propaganda movies — nothing is there for its own sake but only for the grim, grim lesson. As another critic once put it, the minute you see the flower growing in the dreary mud of the back yard, you know it's only there so a brutal Cossack can step on it. (Mr. Moorcock's recent novel, *Warlord of the Air* makes similar historical points and does so much better.)

Bad Moon ends with "Notes from the Pre-dynastic Epoch," the best story by Robert Silverberg I have ever read. To my mind his work has always suffered from the lack of really strict cutting, but here he has made every word tell. Moreover, the chilliness that hangs around even his best work is gone, and the result is a direct appeal of extraordinary poignancy.

Paradox Lost by the late Frederic Brown is a collection of stories "never before published in book form" (according to the jacket copy), four from the 40s, three from 1950/51, and the rest from the early 60s. The early tales are raw wonders-and-marvels with homey-pulp characters and large holes in the science; the execution improves in the later stories, but they remain slick mousetraps at which the reader must collude by accepting a lot of arbitrary givens for the sake of one final twist. In James Blish's terms, only "Puppet Show" (here) has an idea about its idea; it (like so many of the stories) would make a perfect TV show because actors and production can supply the characterization, the scenery, in short the denseness of texture, that

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Mr. Brown doesn't. At bottom these stories are padded anecdotes. (The funiest, "Aelurophobe," almost makes it as pure anecdote.) Some Brownian notions are fascinating — for example, "Double Standard" explores the world of TV characters who exist not as actors but as persons in another world — but even here the only difference the author can find between art and life is sex and profanity. The book contains the famous "Knock," as well as "Something Green," a story I found breathtaking at fourteen, but which now looks much the worse for wear. Others are "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," "Paradox Lost," "The Last Train," "It Didn't Happen," "Obedience," "Ten-Percenter," "Nothing Sirius," and "The New One" (the kind of American myth Stephen Vincent Benet did so much better). The stories are badly over-written (you can skip ever second word and still follow them perfectly well), and aside from some nice bits of humor (a baby fire elemental says, "I'm going to look out through the curtain, Papa. I'll keep my glow down to a glimmer") there's nothing here to think or feel about.

Gordon Dickson's *The Star Road* starts with a slick mousetrap of a story (entitled "Mousetrap"!) but even this one, written in 1952, has more to it than the single plot twist. Mr. Dickson never constructs an ingenious toy merely for the sake of seeing it spin. The collection, which ranges from the late 50s through the 60s, has the usual interesting and varied Dickson aliens, good if they're powerless and/or furry, usually bad if they're powerful. Each story has both an intellectual puzzle *and* something else: in "On Messenger Mountain" an exceptional man learns that he will always be lonely; "Jackal's Meal" shows us the conflict of military and diplomatic temperaments (and aims); "Mousetrap" deals with the tragedy of a brainwashed wreck who wants to respond to good (and furry) aliens but can't; "Whatever Gods There Be" illustrates the self-command of the title (Henley's *Invictus* - Mr. Dickson often quotes poems); and "Hilifter" is a future Boston Tea Party that dwells on the contrast between romantic expectations and reality. Less successful stories are "The Catch," which ought not simply name the seduction of power and authority but show it; "The Christmas Present," in which the sacrifice of alien for human seems not only sentimentally excessive but unnecessary; and "3-Part Puzzle" which posits that humans are superior to aliens because we have moral ideals, a proposition George Bernard Shaw took a much dimmer

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view of in his play "Man of Destiny." (He argues that the English are the most dangerous nation on earth because they can convince themselves that what they *want* is also *virtuous.*) Mr. Dickson is a propagandist whose propaganda passes unnoticed because it's so familiar; "Building on the Line" (the most recent story in the book) is pure Kipling, and I find it, as I do much of Kipling, morally revolting. The author carefully makes his s.f. situation parallel with the building of the railroads across America in the 19th century, from the song the men sing to the ghastly conditions under which they work (who profits by saving all that money and time?). As in Kipling, it's not the importance of the job that justifies the romantic heroism but vice versa; according to the author's spokesman, "fat tourists" will use the Line when it's complete. Mr. Dickson even duplicates Kipling's contempt for the remote administrator (here the Research Department, which doesn't understand front-line conditions), his disregard for the annoyed natives, whose front parlors are being dug up (so to speak), and his mystique about "team spirit" - though the animal analogies used in the story are actually species solidarity, a characteristic human beings either don't have or manage to control with great ease. There are no underpaid Chinese working on the Line or Irishmen who can't get jobs anywhere else; all are volunteers so it's O.K. to ruin their comfort, health, and even lives, and then pay them with Glory. I should add that Mr. Dickson writes magnificently of the psychology of stress and delirium, little as I like his politics, his Men's House mystique, or the appointment ceremony in which the human race is the Line and the Line is the Team and so on, all of which has eerie overtones of der Fuehrer = das Volk = die Partei. (But the protagonist is delirious at the time so maybe he's distorting things.) The collection is half fair and half good, the line of demarcation coinciding pretty much with the age of the stories, the later ones being the better ones.

For reasons known only to itself, Doubleday has published a non-book called *Complex Man* by Marie Farca. It's very hard to read and is full of awful scientific bloopers: e.g. people no longer sleep ("food, drugs, and purity of air compensate for this"), people whose legs have atrophied from birth onwards can learn to walk at age twenty-five, everybody uses motorized chairs hovering on "air jets" (imagine what a storm this would kick up indoors!), and there are "island" satellites of earth

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which have Earth-normal atmospheres and gravity. The author seems caught up in some very detailed, private, untransformed fantasy; you never get the details you need (e.g. something that will enable you to tell the characters apart during the first 100 pages), and you get vast amounts of dramatically irrelevant detail (mostly architectural, including diagrams). Almost nothing is dramatized until the last fifth of the book. Ms. Farca might eventually turn into an s.f. writer, for she has lots of utterly uncontrolled imagination, but she is not any kind of writer now.

The book I asked for in my last column is *The Me Nobody Knows*, ed. Stephen Joseph, Avon, 1969. I want to thank all those who wrote in, especially Mr. Leonard Bloomfield of Manhattan, whose address I mislaid and to whom, therefore, I couldn't write a personal letter.

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A welcome new short from F&SF's book reviewer and the winner of last year's Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula award for best short story, "When It Changed."

A Game of Vlet

by JOANNA RUSS

In Ourdh, near the sea, on a summer's night so hot and still that the marble blocks of the Governor's mansion sweated as if the earth itself were respiring through the stone — which is exactly what certain wise men maintain to be the case — the Governor's palace guard caught an assassin trying to enter the Governor's palace through a secret passage, too many unfortunates have thought they alone knew. This one, his arm caught and twisted by the Captain, beads of sweat starting out on his pale, black-bearded face, was a thin young man in aristocratic robes, followed by the oddest company one could possibly meet — even in Ourdh — a cook, a servant girl, a couple of waterfront beggars, a battered hulk of a man who looked like a professional bodyguard fallen on evil days, and five peasants. These persons remained timidly silent while the Captain tightened his grip on the young man's arm; the young man made an inarticulate sound between his teeth but did not cry out; the Captain shook him, causing him to fall to his knees; then the Captain said, "Who are you, scum!" and the young man answered, "I am Rav." His followers all nodded in concert, like mechanical mice.

"He is," said one of the guards, "he's a magician. I seen him at the banquet a year ago," and the Captain let go, allowing the young man to get to his feet. Perhaps they were a little afraid of magicians, or perhaps they felt a rudimentary shame at harming someone known to the Governor — though the magician had been out of favor for the last eleven zodiacal signs of the year — but this seems unlikely. Humanity, of course, they did not

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have. The Captain motioned his men back and stepped back himself, silent in the main hall of the Governor's villa, waiting to hear what the young nobleman had to say. What he said was most surprising. He said (with difficulty):

"I am a champion player of Vlet."

It was then that the Lady appeared. She appeared quite silently, unseen by anybody, between two of the Governor's imported marble pillars, which were tapered toward the base and set in wreaths of carved and tinted anemones and lilies. She stood a little behind one of the nearby torches, which had been set into a bracket decorated with a group of stylized young women known to aristocratic Ourdh as The Female Virtues: Modesty, Chastity, Fecundity and Tolerance, a common motif in art, and from this vantage point she watched the scene before her. She heard Rav declare his intention of having come only to play a game of Vlet with the Governor, which was not believed, to say the least; she saw the servant girl blurt out a flurry of deaf-and-dumb signs; she heard the guards laugh until they cried, hush each other for fear of waking the Governor, laugh themselves sick again, and finally decide to begin by flaying the peasants to relieve the tedium of the night watch.

It was then that she stepped forward.

"You woke up Sweetie," she said.

That she was not a Lady in truth and in verity might have been seen from certain small signs in a better light — the heaviness of her sandals, for instance, or the less-than-perfect fit of her elaborate, jeweled coiffure, or the streaking and blurring of the gold paint on her face (as if she had applied cosmetics in haste or desperation) — but she wore the semitransparent, elaborately gold-embroidered black robe Ourdh calls "the gown of the night" (which is to be sharply distinguished from "the gown of the evening"), and as she came forward, this fell open, revealing that she wore nothing at all underneath. Her sandals were not noticed. She closed the robe again. The Captain, who had hesitated between anticipations of a bribe and a dressing down from the Governor, hesitated no longer. He put out his hand for money. Several guards might have wondered why the Governor had chosen such an ordinary-looking young woman, but just at that moment — as she came into the light, which was (after all) pretty bad — the Lady yawned daintily like a cat, stretched from top to bottom, smiled a little to herself and gave each of the five

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guards in turn a glance of such deep understanding, such utter promise, and such extraordinary good humor, that one actually blushed. Skill pays for all.

"Poor Sweetie," she said.

"Madam — " began the Captain, a little unnerved.

"I said to Sweetie," went on the Lady, unperturbed, "that his little villa was just the quietest place in the city and so cutey darling that I could stay here forever. And then *you* came in."

"Madam —" said the Captain.

"Sweetie doesn't like noise," said the Lady, and she sat down on the Governor's gilded audience bench, crossing her knees so that her robe fell away, leaving one leg bare to the thigh. She began to swing this bare leg in and out of the shadows so confusingly that none could have sworn later whether it were beautiful or merely passable; moreover, something sparkled regularly at her knee with such hypnotic precision that a junior guard's head began to bob a little, like a pendulum, and he had to be elbowed in the ribs by a comrade. She gave the man a sharp, somehow disappointed look. Then she appeared to notice Rav.

"Who's that?" she said carelessly.

"An assassin," said the Captain.

"No, no," said the Lady, drawling impatiently, "the cute one, the one with the little beard. Who's *he?*"

"I said —" began the Captain with asperity.

"Rav, Madam," interrupted the young man, holding his sore arm carefully and wincing a little (for he had bowed to her automatically), "an unhappy wretch formerly patronized by the Governor, his 'magician,' as he was pleased to call me, but no Mage, Madam, no Grandmaster, only a player with trifles, a composer of little tricks; however, I have found out something, if only that, and I came here tonight to offer it to His Excellentness. I am, my Lady, as you may be yourself, an addict of that wonderful game called Vlet, and I came here tonight to offer to the Governor the most extraordinary board and pieces for the game that have ever been made. That is all; but these gentlemen misinterpreted me and declare that I have come to assassinate His Excellentness, the which" (he took a shuddering breath) "is the farthest from my thoughts. I abhor the shedding of blood, as any of my intimates can tell you. I came only to play a game of Vlet."

"Oooooh!" said the Lady. "Vlet! I adore Vlet!"

"I have been away," continued Rav, "for nearly a year, making this most uncommon board and pieces;

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as I know the Governor's passion for the game. This is no ordinary set, Madam, but a virgin board and virgin pieces which no human hands have ever touched. You may have heard — as all of us have, my Lady — of the virgin speculum or mirror made by certain powerful Mages, and which can be used once — but only once — to look anywhere in the world. Such a mirror must be made of previously unworked ore, fitted in the dark so that no ray of light ever falls upon it, polished in the dark by blind polishers so that no human sight ever contaminates it, and under these conditions, and these conditions only, can the first person who looks into the mirror look anywhere and see anything he wishes. A Vlet board and pieces, similarly made from unworked stone, and without the touch of human hands, is similarly magical, and the first game played on such a board, with such pieces, can control anything in the world, just as the user of the virgin speculum can look anywhere in the world. This gentleman with me" (he indicated the ex-bodyguard) "is a virtuoso contortionist, taught the art under the urgings of the lash. He has performed all the carvings of the pieces with his feet so that we may truly say no human hands have touched them. That gentleman over there" (he motioned toward the cook) "lost a hand in an accident in the Governor's kitchens, and these" (he waved at the peasants) "have had their right hands removed for evading the taxes. The beggars have been similarly deformed by their parents for the practice of their abominable and degrading trade, and the young lady is totally deaf from repeated boxings on the ears given her by her mistress. It is she who crushed the ore for us so that no human ears might hear the sounds of the working. This Vlet board has never been touched by human hands and neither have the pieces. They are entirely virgin. You may notice, as I take them from my sleeve, that they are wrapped in oiled silk, to prevent my touch from contaminating them. I wished only to present this board and pieces to the Governor, in the hope that the gift might restore me to his favor. I have been out of it, as you know. I am an indifferent player of Vlet but a powerful and sound student, and I have worked out a classical game in the last year in which the Governor could — without the least risk to himself — defeat all his enemies and become emperor of the world. He will play (as one player must) in his own person; I declare that I am his enemies *in toto*, and then we play the game, in which, of course, he defeats me. It is that simple."

"Assassin!" growled the Cap-

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tain of the Guard. "Liar!" But the Lady, who had been gliding slowly towards the magician as he talked, with a perfectly practical and unnoticeable magic of her own, here slipped the board and pieces right out of his hands and said, with a toss of her head:

"You will play against *me.*"

The young man turned pale.

"Oh, I know you, I know you," said the Lady, slowly unwrapping the oiled silk from the set of Vlet. "You're the one who kept pestering poor Sweetie about justice and taxes and cutting off people's heads and all sorts of things that were none of your business. Don't interrupt. You're a liar, and you undoubtedly came here to kill Sweetie, but you're terribly inept and very cute, and so" (here she caught her breath and smiled at him) "sit down and play with me." And she touched the first piece.

Now it is often said that in Vlet experienced players lose sight of everything but the game itself, and so passionate is their absorption in this intellectual haze that they forget to eat or drink, and sometimes even to breathe in the intensity of their concentration (this is why Grandmasters are always provided with chamber pots during an especially arduous game), but never before had such a thing actually happened to the Lady. As she touched the first piece — it was a black one — all the sounds in the hall died away, and everyone there, the guards, the pitiful band this misguided magician had brought with him and the great hall itself, the pillars, the fitted blocks of the floor, the frescoes, the torches, everything faded and dissolved into mist. Only she herself existed, she and the board of Vlet, the pieces of Vlet, which stood before her in unnatural distinctness, as if she were looking down from a mountain at the camps of two opposing armies. One army was red and one was black, and on the other side of the great, smoky plain sat the magician, himself the size of a mountain or a god, his lean, pale face working and his black beard standing out like ink. He held in one hand a piece of Red. He looked over the board as if he looked into an abyss, and he smiled pitifully at her, not with fear, but with some intense, fearful hope that was very close to it.

"You are playing for your life," she said, "for I declare myself to be the Government of Ourdh."

"I play," said he, "for the Revolution. As I planned."

And he moved his first piece.

Outside, in the night, five hundred farmers moved against the city gates.

She moved all her Common Persons at once, which was a popular way to open the game.

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They move one square at a time.

So did he.

In back of her Common Persons she put her Strongbox, which is a very strong offensive piece but weak on the defense; she moved her Archpriest — the sliding piece — in front of her Governor, who is the ultimate object of the game, and brought her Elephant to the side, keeping it in reserve. She went to move a set of Common Persons and discovered with a shock that she seemed to have no Common Persons at all and her opponent nothing else; then she saw that all her black Common Persons had fled to the other side of the board and that they had all turned red. In those days it was possible — depending on the direction from which your piece came — either to take an enemy's piece out of the game — "kill it," they said — or convert it to your own use. One signaled this by standing the piece on its head. The Lady had occasionally lost a game to her own converted Vlet pieces, but never in her life before had she seen ones that literally changed color, or ones that slipped away by themselves when you were not looking, or pieces that made noise, for something across the board was making the oddest noise she had ever heard, a shrill, keening sound, a sort of tinny whistling like insects buzzing or all the little Common Persons singing together. Then the Lady gasped and gripped the edge of the Vlet board until her knuckles turned white, for that was exactly what was happening; across the board her enemy's little red pieces of Vlet, Common Persons all, were moving their miniature knees up and down and singing heartily, and what they were singing was:

"The pee-pul!
The pee-pul!"

"An ancient verse," said Rav, mountainous across the board. "Make your move," and she saw her own hand, huge as a giant's, move down into that valley, where transparent buildings and streets seemed to spring up all over the board. She moved her Strongbox closer to the Governor, playing for time.

Lights on late in the Councilors' House; much talk; someone has gone for the Assassins...

He moved another set of Common Persons.

A baker looked out at his house door in Bread Street. In the Street of Conspicuous Display torches flicker and are gone around the buildings. "Is it tonight?" "Tonight!" Someone is scared; someone wants to go home; "Look here, my wife —"

Her Tax-Collector was caught and

stabbed in the back in an alley while the rising simmer of the city,

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crowds spilling, not quite so aimlessly, into the main boulevards

Rav horrified

"We've got to play a clean game! Out in the open! No —"

While she moved the Archpriest

Governor's barricades going up around the Treasury, men called out, they say the priests are behind

And in horror watched him shake his fist at her and stand sullenly grimacing in the square where she had put him; then, before she could stop him, he had hopped two more squares, knocked flat a couple of commoners whose blood and intestines flowed tinily out on to the board, jeered at her, hopped two more and killed a third man before she could get her fingers on him.

"He killed a man! With his own hands!"

"Who?"

"The Archpriest!"

"Get him!"

So she picked up the squirming, congested Archpriest, younger son of a younger son, stupid, spiteful, ambitious (she knew him personally) and thrust him across the board, deep into enemy territory.

Trying to flee the city by water, looks up from under a bale of hides, miserably stinking —

Where the Commons could pothook him to their hearts' content

Sees those faces, bearded and unwashed, a flash of pride among the awful fear, cowers —

"We don't do things that way," said Rav, his voice rolling godlike across the valley, across the towers and terraces, across the parties held on whitewashed roofs where ladies ate cherries and pelted gentlemen with flowers, where aristocratic persons played at darts, embroidered, smoked hemp and behaved as nobles should. One couple was even playing — so tiny as to be almost invisible — a miniature game of Vlet.

"We play a clean game," said Rav.

Which is so difficult (she thought) that only a Grandmaster of Grandmasters attempts it more than once a year. Pieces must be converted but not killed.

The crowd on Market Street is turned back by the troops.

Her Elephant, which she immobilized

Men killed, children crushed, a dreadful silence, in which someone screams, while the troops, not knowing why

and set her Nobles to killing one another, which an inept player can actually do in Vlet

stand immobilized, the Captains gone; some secret fear or failure of will breathes through the city, and again the crowds surge forward, but cannot bring themselves to

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She threw away piece after piece
not even to touch, perhaps thinking: these are our natural masters? or: where are we going? What are we doing?
Gave him the opportunity for a Fool's Kill, which he did not take
The Viceroy to the Governor walks untouched through superstitious awe, through the silent crowd; he mounts the steps of the Temple —
Exposed every piece
begins to address the crowd
While Rav smiled pitifully, and far away, out in the city suburbs, in the hovels of peasant freeholds that surrounded the real city, out in the real night she could hear a rumble, a rising voice, thunder; she finds herself surrounding
Arrest that man
the Red Governor, who wasn't a Governor but a Leader, a little piece with Rav's features and with the same pitiful, nervous, gallant smile.

"Check" said the Lady, "and Mate." She did not want to do it. A guard in the room laughed. Out in the city all was quiet. Then, quite beside herself, the strange Lady in the black *gown of the night,* seeing a Red Assassin with her own features scream furiously from the other side of the board and dart violently across it, took the board in both hands and threw the game high into the air. Around her everything whirled: board, pieces, the magician, who was one moment huge, the next moment tiny, the onlookers, the guards, the very stone blocks of the hall seemed to spin. The torches blazed hugely. The pieces, released from the board, were fighting in midair. Then the Lady fell to her knees, rearranging the game, surrounding the last remnant of Black, snatching the Red Leader out of his trap, muttering desperately to herself as Rav cried, "What are you doing? What are you doing?" and around them the palace shook, the walls fell, the very earth shuddered on its foundations.

"Check," said the Lady, "and Mate." A rock came sailing lazily past them, shattering the glass of the Governor's foreign window, brought at enormous expense over sea and marsh in a chest full of sawdust, the only piece of transparent glass in the city. "Trust a mob to find a window!" said the Lady, laughing. Outside could be heard a huge tramping of feet, the concerted breathing of hundreds, thousands, a mob, a storm, a heaving sea of Common Persons, and all were singing:

"Come on, children of the national unity!

The glorious diurnal period has arrived.

Let us move immediately against tyranny;

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The bloody flag is hauled up!"

"My God!" cried Rav, "you don't understand!" as the Lady — with un-Ladylike precision — whipped off her coiffure and slammed it across the face of the nearest guard. Her real hair was a good deal shorter. "Wonderful things — fifteen pounds' weight —" she shouted, and ripping off the robe of night, tripped the next guard, grabbed his sword and put herself back to back with the ex-bodyguard who had another guard's neck between his hands and was slowly and methodically throttling the man to death. The servant girl was beating someone's head against the wall. The Lady wrapped a soldier's cloak around herself and belted it; then she threw the jeweled wig at one of the peasants, who caught it, knocked over the two remaining guards, who were still struggling feebly, not against anyone in the room but against something in the air, like flies in treacle. None had offered the slightest resistance. She took the magician by the arm, laughing hugely with relief.

"Let me introduce myself," she said. "I —"

"Look out!" said Rav.

"Come on!" she shouted, and as the mob poured through the Governor's famous decorated archway, made entirely — piece by piece — of precious stones collected at exorbitant cost from tax defaulters and convicted blackmailers, she cut off the head of an already dead guard and held it high, shouting, "The Pee-pul! The Pee-pul!" and shoved Rav into position beside her. He looked sick but he smiled. The People roared past them. He had, in his hands, the pieces and board of their game of Vlet, and to judge from his expression, they were causing him considerable discomfort. He winced as tiny lances, knives, pothooks, plough blades and swords bristled through his fingers like porcupine quills. They seemed to be jabbing at each other and getting his palms instead.

"Can't you stop them!" she whispered. The last of the mob was disappearing through the inverted pillars.

"No!" he said. "The game's not over. You cheated —" and with a yell he dropped the whole thing convulsively, board and all. The pieces hit the floor and rolled in all directions, punching, jabbing, chasing each other, screaming in tiny voices, crawling under the board, buzzing and dying like a horde of wasps. The Lady and the magician dropped to their knees — they were alone in the room by now — and tried to sweep the pieces together, but they continued to fight, and some ran under the dead guards or under the curtains.

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"We must — we *must* play the game through," said Rav in a hoarse voice. "Otherwise anyone — anyone who gets hold of them can —"

He did not finish the sentence.

"Then we'll play it through, O Rav," she said. "But this time, dammit, you make the moves *I* tell you to make!"

"I told you," he began fiercely, "that I abhor bloodshed. That is true. I will not be a party to it, not even for —"

"Listen," she said, holding up her hand, and there on the floor they crouched while the sounds of riot and looting echoed distantly from all parts of the city. The south windows of the hall began to glow. The poor quarter was on fire. Someone nearby shouted; something struck the ground; and closer and closer came the heavy sound of surf, a hoarse, confused babble.

He began to gather up the pieces.

A little while later the board was only a board, and the pieces had degenerated into the sixty-four pieces of the popular game of Vlet. They were not, she noticed, particularly artistically carved. She walked out with Rav into the Governor's garden, among the roses, and there — with the sound of the horrors in the city growing ever fainter as the dawn increased — they sat down, she with her head on her knees, he leaning his back against a peach tree.

"I'd better go," she said finally.

"Not back to the Governor," said Rav, shuddering. "Not now!" She giggled.

"Hardly," she said, "after tying him and his mistress up with the sheets and stealing her clothes. I fancy he's rather upset. You surprised me at my work, magician."

"One of *us!*" said the magician, amazed. "You're a —"

"One of them," said she, "because I live off them. I'm a parasite. I didn't *quite* end that last game with a win, as I said I did. It didn't seem fair somehow. Your future state would have no place for me, and I do have myself to look after, after all. Besides, none of your damned peasants can play Vlet, and I enjoy the game." She yawned involuntarily.

"I ended that last game," she said, "with a stalemate.

"Ah, don't worry, my dear," she added, patting the stricken man's cheek and turning up to him her soot-stained, blood-stained, paint-stained little face. "You can always make another virgin Vlet board, and I'll play you another game. I'll even trick the Governor if you can find a place for me on the board. Some day. A clean game. Perhaps. Perhaps it's possible, eh?"

But that's another story.

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Mr. Bishop writes: "This one's a fantasy, but the central incident is true. I heard it when I was a 9-year-old boy sitting in a barbershop in Mulvane, Kansas. Amazingly enough, the idea of tornadoes striking in a seemingly intelligent, premeditated pattern came to me before four or five twisters recently converged on Athens" (Georgia, where the author lives).

In Rubble, Pleading

by MICHAEL BISHOP

Justice Weir, a boy who some said was demented, sat in the paintless shoeshine chair in the back of the shop and stared past the peeling, red-leather barber chairs at the rain.

For well over three months it had been raining in Kansas, and for the past four or five weeks whirlwinds had been accompanying the tempests. Tornadoes, roaring like waterfalls, had struck ten or twelve small grainbelt communities, completely leveling them. The tornadoes continued to strike. They roared in ever-widening circles of sodden devastation from a point apparently dead center in the state. In recent days they had destroyed communities in both northern Oklahoma and southern Nebraska, small borderline towns.

Justice Weir was in Ral Wagner's barbershop, a cavelike recess next to the Pixie Theatre. The jutting, stucco overhang which capped the Pixie Theatre also sheltered the narrow fronting of Wagner's barbershop, so that the boy, seated regally on a raised shoeshine chair, stared out the front window as if it were a watering eye loosely shaded by a stucco hand. It was cold. The rain blew against the window and washed swirling, undulating fingerprints across the glass.

Justice looked at Ral Wagner clipping and snipping the hair of the dour-faced, fiftyish man in the chair nearest the window. The boy listened to the scissors go *sclip-sclip, sclip-sclip* and heard the halting drones of a barbershop conversation. It seemed there were no words, only the shapes of words.

"They've hit all around," Colonel Aspenshade said, "all

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around the major population centers. It's uncanny, how it's been so far."

The words impinged rudely on Justice's thoughts, but he let them in.

The man in the chair had been in the army. A year before, he had returned from the Far East and retired from the military to make his permanent home in Sibyl, where he had been raised. He came into Wagner's barbershop once a week for a haircut.

Colonel Aspenshade said, "They haven't hit a community of more than six thousand yet, Ral."

"Sibyl has eight," Wagner said. "Sibyl has eight thousand."

"Don't assume that means anything. They're hitting larger communities every day. In fact, I think it's a purposeful thing, Ral. I think they're working their way up, so to speak — from villages to towns, from towns to small cities, from small cities to places like Wichita where you've got aircraft factories and military bases. A kind of pattern."

"Oh, I don't know," Wagner said. "It's the time of year."

A truck with boarded sides came jouncing into the left-hand part of the window. The truck was weighted with storm-lopped branches and even gangling trees uprooted by the night's high winds. Before the truck clattered out of sight on the red cobblestones, Justice saw a man leap awkwardly into the street, loosing himself from the running board and then struggling to regain his balance against the momentum of his hurtling body.

The man came into the shop, ushered in by the wind and the curt tangling of the bell over Wagner's door. He was wearing a rainslick and a detachable rubber hood from out of which his face peered yellow, fiercely constricted. He dripped like a newly washed shirt.

Justice looked at him quietly.

"Look," Wagner said, scratching an ear with his scissors. "Ole Mulcusta is covered with sweat."

"That isn't sweat," Colonel Aspenshade said with strained joviality, gripping the armrests with both heavy-knuckled hands. "That's just rain water, Ral. Everyone knows schoolteachers don't sweat."

Mulcusta, the schoolteacher; a man with a touch of the actor in him. His cowled-over features betrayed, even in agitation, something sanctimonious and nunlike. He gesticulated. Then he tore off his nun's cowl and threw it with a kind of studied fillip on a chair. He came deep into the shop and stood directly in front of Justice. The boy saw the man's narrow face as a huge and wet alienness, a delicately oiled mask behind which two

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terrible red eyes burned. Mulcusta pointed a finger, and his wet khaki sleeve fell back to the elbow, revealing a thin and gnarled hand.

"He wasn't any older," the schoolteacher said dramatically, "than this boy here. He wasn't a bit older, but I couldn't do anything, I couldn't do anything."

"Mulcusta," Wagner said, slurring the medial vowel, "Mulc'sta, you're going to scare the boy."

Justice saw the barber's apron move with crimpy starchiness over Colonel Aspenshade's hands.

"I ain't scared," Justice said, looking again at the schoolteacher.

Mulcusta abruptly faced about and stared at Wagner (it was as if the boy could see through the back of the newcomer's head) with his terrible, cinderlike eyes. Somehow, even though he had been wearing a hood, Mulcusta's hair had become so wet that the strands were all knit together and shiny; he seemed to be wearing a scalp-tight helmet of black plastic. His translucent red ears jutted out from the helmet like incongruous handles.

"Scare the boy!" he shouted from an open-legged stance. "Look, I'm the frightened one. I've been over in Arles all day, and that place is wiped out. Wiped out. And I've seen enough frightening things there to last me forever — heartbreaking things."

There was a long silence in the shop. Mulcusta went over to the chair where he had thrown his rubber hood and sat down.

Colonel Aspenshade stood up, undid the apron from his neck, shook the clipped hair onto the floor. He folded the apron over the radiator by the window and sat back down in the barber chair. He looked at Mulcusta, his large, soldier's hands on his thighs.

"Go ahead, Mulc'sta. We won't spoil your show. Tell us what you saw, the specifics of it."

Wagner said nothing, but eased himself into the barber chair facing Mulcusta when the schoolteacher began to talk. A chair separated the barber from Colonel Aspenshade.

"All right, all right," Mulcusta began, twisting the rainhood in his gnarled hands. "The storm, the tornado, went through Arles around three or four, something early. It tore hell out of everything. All the telephone lines down and the poles and boards all scattered whichways. Cars and pickups crushed-in, too, like a colossal accident. And Arles is only nine miles from here. Here in Sibyl we missed all the hell and spun-out rubble. We missed everything but some rain and the corners of the high winds.

"Do you understand how close we were to that monster? It could've been us, with the funnel turning this way last night and

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following the river. It's only nine miles...."

"We were real lucky this time," Wagner said noncommittally.

Colonel Aspenshade grunted. "We weren't lucky, Ral. It wasn't our turn yet. Arles just isn't as big as Sibyl, not so many people there."

"Oh, the boards and power lines and messes there," Mulcusta went on as if no one had spoken. "People pleading in the broken houses. At one place there were just arms and legs in among the boards, in among the splinters and the broken furniture. I saw iceboxes and beds in the same rooms, except that there aren't really any rooms any more. Shingles, glass, linoleum, tree roots lying on their sides like big, weedy footstools.

"Oh, it's a long, bleeding, scattered mess, that front street in Arles, and we came in on it this morning — me and the Wichita Red Cross people and Sheriff Cluney and some high-school boys to help clean things up and dig the dead ones, the pleading dead ones, out from under the mess."

"Lord," Colonel Aspenshade interjected. "Maybe it was sweat. But cleaning up afterwards and declaring Kansas a disaster area isn't good enough. No one's come to grips with the pattern yet."

Wagner looked down. "What should we do? Set up bazookas in every town in the state and tell 'em to lob mortars at anything that looks like a tornado?"

For some reason the barber looked directly at Justice. Then he dropped his eyes again and rapped a plastic comb against the palm of one hand.

Colonel Aspenshade's face was stony, stricken. Then it relaxed. "No, no, Ral, but you're right, there aren't any battle lines in this conflict." He compressed his lips. "This thing needs analysis, is what I'm saying. There's a pattern here, goddamn it, and we need to find out who the hell the enemy is."

"The water tower was down too when we got there," Mulcusta said, ignoring this exchange. "The rain was still blowing, and never stopped all the time we was there. The Red Cross people put blankets and beds in the school gym, which was all right except for some windows blown out and filled in with plywood. Not really beds, though. Cots, with army-green blankets. Up and down the walls, then, there were people grey-faced and scrunched-up under blankets, fifty or sixty already there when we came in.

"Cluney asked why so many were hurt, and Dr. Wright, the principal there, said it was because there hadn't been any warning at all, it hadn't even been raining when the tornado came through.

"Nobody saw it come,' Dr.

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Wright said, 'and tornado warnings on the radio and TV are useless now anyway. You can't live like a normal human being if you listen to all of them.'"

Mulcusta paused. He allowed his voice to drop to a stagy, confidential whisper. "So far as Dr. Wright knew it was true that nobody had seen the tornado come. But I found someone while we were working in Arles who had watched it form, someone who knew about its coming beforehand."

"Who?" Wagner asked. "The boy you were talking about?"

"I'm going to tell you. Let me set it up first; let me tell you how it was there in Arles."

"Get on with it," Colonel Aspenshade said, looking at his watch. "It's almost six o'clock."

"All right, all right now. I am." The schoolteacher twisted the rainhood in his hands. "After putting up some more cots, we left the gymnasium and went out into the rain. We dug at the ruins of the houses, threw bricks into truck-beds, cleaned branches out of the streets. Broken foliage, litter. I don't know how many's still working there."

"A hundred or so," Wagner said abruptly. "The radio said so. A hundred or so volunteers. Now get on with it, like the colonel says."

Mulcusta rubbed a finger across his bottom lip. "A long time after leaving the gym, I walked by myself into the widest stretch where the twister had gone before me. I was wet all the way through. Then I saw the boy. He was standing in this ditch full of green water and floating branches, standing up as straight as he could. The water was just on a level with —"

"What the hell was he doing in a ditch?" Wagner said.

"—on a level with his knees, his pajamas sticking to him like a second skin, you know. But he was standing up because he had to stand up; it was impossible for him to lean or stoop or anything. He was wearing a heavy jacket, a thick leather jacket with wool all around the collar, and it was too big for him. But it wasn't zipped up, the jacket, and — this is the frightening part I was telling you about — there was a board through the boy's stomach, going in in front and coming out right through the leather jacket.

"The board looked like it had been put in him carefully, like a letter slipped into a mail slot. The jacket wasn't even torn in the back, just carefully slit. Even so, the boy was stepping through the water, and I ran to him and followed along beside him at the top of the ditch."

"A board!" Wagner said. "How big a board? How could he walk with a board struck through him?"

"He couldn't have," Colonel

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Aspenshade said, studying Mulcusta. "Sounds like one of those old tornado stories my grandfather used to tell. My grandfather probably inspired that fellow who wrote about the little girl being carried off to the land of Oz."

Justice wondered if the land of Oz could truly be reached by tornado.

"You don't believe me? Is it you don't believe me?" Mulcusta was staring irritably at Wagner, only Wagner, with bright cinderlike eyes.

"What, a board in his stomach?"

"Isn't that what I told you? You don't believe me?"

Wagner slumped back in the upholstered chair. A far quarreling of thunder accompanied his words. "I didn't say that. I didn't say I didn't believe you."

Colonel Aspenshade grunted, "L. Frank Baum," and turned his attention on Justice for a moment. The boy returned his stare and watched the colonel lapse again into a preoccupied reverie. The window rattled, there was an uneasy silence.

Mulcusta, defiantly, resumed: "The boy's nose was running, snot all over his lips and chin. He didn't at first act like he could see anything. He just walked through the water, very dainty, like a rooster on a fresh sawdust floor. And the rain was falling hard in the ditch.

"Tlac! tlac! tlac!"

Justice saw Mulcusta's meat-colored throat when he made this noise, and both rows of clacking yellow teeth.

Mulcusta threw out his arms. "'Hey!' I yelled at him. 'Get out of that goddamn ditch!"

The schoolteacher got up and began pacing, gesticulating, swinging the rubber cowl in one hand. Justice saw that his yellow face was inflaming itself and growing orange along his cheek and jaw bones.

"'Get out of there!' I hollered at him.

"The boy stopped walking and looked at me for the first time, looked at me like he really saw me and wasn't just staring at the place he had heard me yell from. He wasn't any older than this boy, than poor Justice here — maybe twelve. In shock, in a daze.

"He just looked at me and said, 'The water feels good. It's cool.'

"'Here!' I yelled at him. 'Let me help you out of there!'

"I could see the blood through his pajama shirt, a deep pink stain around the edges of the board, But he didn't seem to be bleeding any more, just walking in the ditch, ignoring the pain, I guess. I was yelling into his face."

"'Come on, son! Let me help you out of there!'"

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Wagner said, "Just how long had he been walking with this *board* in him? How long was he *ignoring* all the pain?"

"Wait a minute, Ral," Colonel Aspenshade said. He swiveled his chair toward the barber and the schoolteacher. "Go ahead, Mulc-'sta."

Mulcusta nudged a clipping of hair with the toe of his boot. He ignored the colonel. Suddenly he faced the wall, his back to the two men. Only Justice could see his sharp, birdlike profile.

"Then the boy began to cry," Mulcusta said, letting go of the words as if they were lined up single-file in his throat, under pressure. "Maybe he was crying at me, or crying because he really felt the board in him for the first time. I don't know how long he'd been in that ditch, looking for help, and now he didn't understand that I was the help. Not really.

"'Take the board out,' he said. He had both hands hanging straight down at his sides. 'Take the board out, mister.'

"I just looked at him. I couldn't do anything. He shouldn't've asked me that because there wasn't anything I could do.

"'Please take it out,' he asked again, 'Please. Please.'

"'Goddamn it!' I yelled. 'That'll kill you!'

"'Please,' he said: 'Please.'

"He looked at me and said, 'I'll give you some money. I've got some money. Please, you can take it.' He was blubbering, crying through his nose. A siren started wailing from somewhere.

"'Goddamn it!' I yelled over the siren. 'I don't want your money. I don't want it. Don't ask me that.'

"'You're afraid you'll get splinters in your shitty old hands!' he screamed at me. 'You're afraid, afraid of splinters!'

"'Shut up, boy!' I yelled. 'What's the matter with you?'"

Mulcusta dropped his rainhood on the floor, letting it slide from his long fingers as if it were something less garish and ugly: a silk scarf or an embroidered handkerchief. Slowly, very slowly, he turned around and faced his audience again.

"The boy stopped crying for a minute and said, 'I've got a board in me,' just like he'd wanted me to ask what was the matter with him so he could say that: 'I've got a board in me, mister.'

"He reached his arm out and grabbed me by the raincoat. I made him let go. He was still begging.

"'I got gloves in my coat pockets. This is my daddy's coat. If you put the gloves on, you won't get splinters. Please.'"

Colonel Aspenshade said, "Okay, Mulc'sta. But what about his seeing the tornado form?"

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"Just a minute, just a minute. I got in the ditch with the boy and lifted him up to the bank. The rain was still ricocheting around, the siren still screaming. 'Please,' the boy kept saying. 'Please.' I got him to stop that on the way back to the gym. I think he realized I wasn't going to pull the board out for him; it couldn't be done in the rain. I held his elbow and walked along beside him taking little half steps. He looked straight ahead, not at all the rubble around us.

"'We're gonna get you some help,' I said. 'Just relax now.'

"He didn't turn his head, but he suddenly started talking. He told me he'd gone outside a little after midnight in his father's coat; he'd snuck out of the house to look at the sky.

"'Lights inside my head,' the boy said, 'told me to go out and look at the sky. They told me to get other people to go, too.'

"He said he was afraid to do that, he wasn't supposed to be up, he didn't want to do what the lights told him to."

"What the hell did he see out there?" Colonel Aspenshade asked.

"Green lightning, he said. Pale-green lightning. The boy said it didn't come in arrows and razor flashes, but in pale-green sheets. Usually sheet lightning is off in the distance, near the horizons, but this was different, he said. The sheets glowed under the belly of the clouds and reminded him of the lights that had talked to him before he came outside. He understood a little of what the sheets were saying.

"'They wanted me to get people outside,' he said, 'and I didn't want to. I wanted to shout, 'Get down in your basements!" But I couldn't move, it was holding me.'

"He said he could tell something was angry with him, it paralyzed him for not obeying. He had to stand in his back yard and watch while a funnel shape formed under the pale-green cloud belly. It dropped down like a crooked arm over the rooftops to the west, over by the highway we used to go into Arles. Everything exploded, he said. Fences, roofs, barns, everything."

"Lord," Colonel Aspenshade said. "That's it. That's it, Ral."

The barber didn't respond. He opened and closed his scissors.

"'The board came right at me,' the boy said. 'It came on purpose. It came out of all kinds of other trash and burst my stomach.' He started crying again, his shoulders going up and down. 'And now I have this shitty board in me, and I wish you'd take it out.'

"I finally got him to the gym. They took him inside and he died there. He kept telling the Red Cross people to put on his daddy's gloves and pull the board out.

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"Everybody had too much sense to do that, and he died lying sideways on one of their cots."

Mulcusta stopped talking and sat down, leaving the rainhood in the middle of the floor as evidence of his commitment, his grief.

Wagner said, "What was the boy's name?"

"I don't know. Somebody said it, but I don't remember now. All I can remember is the principal saying he was behind two grades in school — although he sounded bright enough to me, especially hurting like he was."

"I think the people at the Air Force base in Wichita might be interested in your story," Colonel Aspenshade said. He looked shaken, abstracted.

"What you going to do now?" Wagner asked Mulcusta.

"Me, I'm going home to bed." Mulcusta rose so hoveringly that he seemed weighted between uprightness and imbalance. He picked up his rainhood, slipped it on, stared for a moment into the mirror. "Good-by, gentlemen. Good-by, Justice."

He went out. The bell tangled. The wind came in. The colonel's apron blew off the radiator.

Colonel Aspenshade paid Wagner for his haircut.

He said, "I'm going to be going, too, Ral. All the way to Wichita." He followed Mulcusta out the door. The bell tangled again.

In the barbershop there were only one man and a boy. Justice dandled his legs and smelled the shoe polish, pink hair wax, shaving lather, and green tonics — conscious as well of the heavily septic odor of the rain. This smell moved as if by osmosis through the sweating window into his nostrils.

He was glad that it was still daylight and that he didn't have to try to get anyone into the streets. Despite the rain, there were a good number of people already out there, hurrying on the cobblestones.

Sheets of lime-colored lightning played in his head.

Justice knew that the experiment with towns like Arles and Sibyl was over and that already there were huge black funnels forming over places like Wichita and the two Kansas Cities. The boy wondered how long it would take Colonel Aspenshade to discover this.

"Justice," Wagner said, "do you want a haircut?"

"No. I'm just looking out the window."

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"You never know when he'll fall off the wagon."

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Why so much downbeat, grim science fiction, the readers write. Why not more upbeat, even funny sf? Why not, we agreed and determined to convert the blackest of sf writers on the theory that the rest would then fall cheerfully into line.

A Delightful Comedic Premise

by BARRY N. MALZBERG

Dear Mr. Malzberg:

I wonder if you'd be interested in writing for us — on a semicommissioned basis, of course — a funny short-story or novelette. Although the majority of your work, at least the work which I have read is characterized by a certain gloom, a blackness, a rather despairing view of the world, I am told by people who represent themselves to be friends of yours that you have, in private, a delightful sense of humor which overrides your melancholia and makes you quite popular at small parties. I am sure you would agree that science fiction, at least at present, has all the despair and blackness which it or my readers can stand, and if you could come in with a light-hearted story, we would not only be happy to publish it, it might start you on a brand-new career. From these same friends I am given to understand that you are almost thirty-four years of age, and surely you must agree that despair is harder and harder to sustain when you move into a period of your life where it becomes personally imminent; in other words, you are moving now into the Heart Attack Zone.

Dear Mr. Ferman:

Thank you very much for your letter and for your interest in obtaining from me a light-hearted story. It so happens that you and my friends have discovered what I like to think of as My Secret...that I am not a despairing man at all but rather one with a delicious if

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somewhat perverse sense of humor, who sees the comedy in the human condition and only turns out the black stuff because it is now fashionable and the word rates, at all lengths, must be sustained.

I have had in mind for some time writing a story about a man, let me call him Jack, who is able to re-evoke the sights and sounds of the 1950's in such a concrete and viable fashion that he is actually able to *take* people back into the past, both individually and in small tourist groups. (This idea is not completely original; Jack Finney used it in TIME AND AGAIN, and of course this chestnut has been romping or, I should say, dropping around the field for forty years, but hear me out.) The trouble with Jack is that he is not able to re-evoke the more fasionable and memorable aspects of the 1950's, those which are so much in demand in our increasingly perilous and confusing times but instead can recover only the failures, the not-quite-successes, the aspects-that-never-made-it. Thus he can take himself and companions not to Ebbets Field, say, where the great Dodger teams of the 1950's were losing with magnificence and stolid grace but to Shibe Park in Philadelphia, home of the Athletics and Phillies, where on a Tuesday afternoon a desultory crowd of four thousand might be present to watch senile managers fall asleep in the dugout or hapless rookies fail once again to hit the rising curve. He cannot, in short, recapture the Winners but only the Losers: the campaign speeches of Estes Kefauver, recordings by the Bell Sisters and Guy Mitchell, the rambling confessions of minor actors before the McCarthy screening committee that they once were Communists and would appreciate the opportunity to get before the full committee and press to make a more definite statement.

Jack is infuriated by this and no wonder; he is the custodian of a unique and possibly highly marketable talent — people increasingly love the past, and a guided tour through it as opposed to records, tapes, rambling reminiscences would be enormously exciting to them — but he cannot for the life of him get to what he calls the Real Stuff, the more commercial and lovable aspects of that cuddly decade. Every time that he thinks he has recaptured Yankee Stadium in his mind and sweeps back in time to revisit it, he finds himself at Wrigley Field in Chicago where Wayne Terwillger, now playing first base, misses a foul pop and runs straight into the stands. What can he do? What can he do about this reckless and uncontrollable talent of his, which in its sheerest perversity simply will not remit to

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his commands. (It is a subconscious ability, you see; if he becomes self-conscious, it leaves him entirely.) Jack is enraged. He has cold sweats, flashes of gloom and hysteria. (I forgot to say that he is a failed advertising copywriter, now working in Cleveland on display advertising mostly for the Shaker Heights district. He needs money and approbation. His marriage, his *second* marriage, is falling apart. All of this will give the the plot substance and humanity, to say nothing of warm twitches of insight.) He *knows* that he is onto something big, and yet his clownish talent, all big feet and wide ears, mocks him.

He takes his problem to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist takes some convincing, but after being taken into the offices of COSMOS science fiction to see the editor rejecting submissions at a penny a word, he believes everything. He says he will help Jack. This psychiatrist, who I will call Dr. Mandleman, fires all of his patients and enters into a campaign to help Jack recover the more popular and marketable aspects of the fifties. He too sees the Big Money. He moves in with Jack. A psychiatrist in his own home: Together they go over the top forty charts of that era, call up retired members of the New York football Giants, pore through old Congressional Records in which McCarthy is again and again thunderously denounced by two liberal representatives...

Do you see the possibilities? I envision this as being somewhere around 1,500 words but could expand or contract it to whatever you desire. I am very busy as always but could make room in my schedule for this project, particularly if you could see fit to give a small down payment. Would fifty dollars seem excessive? I look forward to word from you.

Dear Mr. Malzberg:

I believe that you have utterly misunderstood my letter and the nature of the assignment piece.

There is nothing *funny* in a fantasy about a man who can recapture only the ugly or forgotten elements of the past. Rather, this is a bitter satire on the present which you have projected, based upon your statement that "people love their past," with the implication that they find the future intolerable. What is funny about *that?* What is funny about failure too? What is funny about the Philadelphia Athletics of the early nineteen fifties with their ninety-four-year-old manager? Rather, you seem to be on the way to constructing another of your horrid metaphors for present and future, incompetence presided over by senescence.

This idea will absolutely not

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work, not at least within the context of a delightful comedic premise, and as you know, we are well-inventoried with work by you and others which will depress people. I cannot and will not pay fifty dollars in front for depressing stuff like this.

Perhaps you will want to take another shot at this.

Dear Mr. Ferman:

Thanks for your letter. I am truly sorry that you fail to see the humor in failure or in the forgettable aspects of the past — people, I think, must learn to laugh at their foibles — but bow to your judgment.

Might I suggest another idea which has been in mind for some time. I would like to write a story of a telepath, let me call him John, who is able to establish direct psionic links with the minds, if one can call them "minds," of the thoroughbreds running every afternoon except for Sundays and three months a year at Aqueduct and Belmont race tracks in Queens, New York. John's psionic faculties work at a range of fifty yards; he is able to press his nose against the wire gate separating paddock from customers and actually get *inside* the minds of the horses. Dim thoughts like little shoots of grass press upon his own brain; he is able to determine the mental state and mood of the horses as in turn they parade by him. (Horses of course do not verbalize; John must deduce those moods subverbally.)

Obviously John is up to something. He is a mind reader; he should, through the use of this talent, be able to get some line on the outcome of a race by knowing which horses feel well, which horses' thoughts are clouded by the possibility of soporifics, which other horses's minds show vast energy because of the probable induction of stimulants. Surely he should be able to narrow the field down to two or three horses anyway which *feel good* and, by spreading his bets around these in proportion to the odds, assure himself of a good living.

(I should have said somewhat earlier on, but, as you know, am very week at formal outlines, that John's talents are restricted to the reading of the minds of *animals;* he cannot for the life of him screen the thoughts of a fellow human. If he could, of course, he would simply check out the trainers and jockeys, but it is a perverse and limited talent, and John must make the best of what God has given him, as must we all — for instance I outline poorly.)

The trouble is that John finds there to be no true correlation between the prerace mood or thoughts of horses and the eventual

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outcome. Horses that feel *well* do not necessarily win, and those horses from whom John has picked up the most depressing and suicidal emanations have been known to win. It is not a simple reversal; if it were, John would be able to make his bets on the basis of reverse correlation and do quite well this way; rather, what it seems to be is entirely *random*. Like so much of life, the prerace meditations of horses appear to have no relationship to the outcome; rather, motives and consequence are fractured, split, entirely torn apart; and this insight, which finally comes upon John after the seventh race at Aqueduct on June 12, 1974, when he has lost fifty-five dollars, drives him quite mad; his soul is split, his mind shattered; he runs frantically through the sparse crowds (it is a Tuesday, and you know what OTB has done to race track attendance anyway) shouting, screaming, bellowing his rage to the heavens. "There's no connection!" he will scream. "Nothing makes sense, nothing connects, there is no reason at all!" and several burly Pinkertons, made sullen by rules which require them to wear jackets and ties at all times, even on this first hot day of the year, seize him quite roughly and drag him into the monstrous computer room housing the equipment of the American Totalisor Company; there a sinister track executive, his eyes glowing with cunning and evil will say, "Why don't you guys ever learn?" (he is a metaphor for the Devil, you see; I assure you that this will be properly planted, and the story itself will be an *allegory*) and, coming close to John, will raise a hand shaped like a talon, he will bring it upon John, he will...

I propose this story to be 25,000 words in length, a cover story in fact. (You and Ronald Walotsky will see the possibilities here, and Walotsky, I assure you, draws horses very well.) Although I am quite busy, the successful author of fifteen stories in this field, two of the novels published in *hardcover*, I could make time in my increasingly heavy schedule to get the story to you within twelve hours of your letter signifying outline approval. I think that an advance in this case of fifty dollars would be quite reasonable and look forward to hearing from you by return mail, holding off in the meantime from plunging into my next series of novels which, of course, are already under lucrative conract.

Dear Mr. Malzberg:

We're not getting anywhere.

What in God's name is *funny* about a man who perceives "motives and consequences to be entirely fractured...torn apart?" Our readers, let me assure you,

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have enough troubles of their own; they are already quite aware of this or do not *want* to be aware of it. Our readers, an intelligent and literate group of people numbering into the multiple thousands, have long since understood that life is unfair and inequitable, and they are looking for entertainment, release, a little bit of *joy*.

Don't you understand that this commission was for a *funny* story? There is nothing funny about your proposal, nor do I see particular humor in an allegory which will make use of the appearance of the devil.

Perhaps we should forget this whole thing. There are other writers I would rather have approached, and it was only at the insistence of your friends that I decided to give you a chance at this one. We are heavily inventoried, as I have already said, on the despairing stuff, but if in due course you would like to send me one of your characteristic stories, *on a purely speculative basis*, I will consider it as a routine submission.

Dear Mr. Ferman:

Please wait a minute or just a few minutes until you give me another chance to explain myself. I was sure that the two story ideas you have rejected, particularly the second, were quite funny; but editorial taste, as we professional writers know, is the prerogative of the editor; and if you *don't* see the humor, I can't show it to you, humor being a very rare and special thing. I am however momentarily between novels, waiting for the advance on the series contract to come through and *would* be able to write you a story at this time; let me propose one final idea to you before you come to the wrong conclusion that I am not a funny writer and go elsewhere, to some wretched hack who does not have one quarter of the bubbling humor and winsomely comprehensive view of the foibles of the human condition that I do.

I would like to write a story about a science-fiction writer, a highly successful science-fiction writer but one who nevertheless, because of certain limitations in the field and slow payment from editors, is forced to make do on an income of three thousand four hundred and eighty-three dollars a year (last year) from all of his writings and, despite the pride and delight of knowing that he is near or at the top of his field, finds getting along on such an income, particularly in the presence of a wife and family, rather difficult, his wife not understanding entirely (as she *should* understand) that science fiction is not an ultimately lucrative field for most of us but repays in satisfaction, in *great* satisfactions. This writer, who we shall call Barry,

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is possessed after a while by his fantasies; the partitions, in his case, between reality and fantasy have been sheared through by turmoil and economic stress, and he believes himself in many ways to be not only the creator but the receptacle of his ideas, ideas which possess him and stalk him through the night.

Barry is a gentle man, a man with a gracious sense of humor, a certain *je ne sais quoi* about him which makes him much celebrated at parties, a man whose occasionally sinister fictions serve only to mask his gay and joyous nature... but Barry is seized by his fantasies; people do not truly understand him, and now at last those aforementioned walls have crumpled: he takes himself to be not only the inventor but the *hero* of his plot ideas. Now he is in a capsule set on Venus flyby looking out at the green planet while he strokes his diminutive genitals and thinks of home; now again he is an archetypical alien, far from home, trying to make convincing contact with humanity; now yet again he is a rocketship, an actual physical rocketship, a phallic object extended to great length and power, zooming through the heavens, penetrating the sky.

I'll do this at 1500 words for five dollars down. Please let me hear from you.

Dear Mr. Malzberg:

This was a doomed idea from the start. I hope you won't take this personally, but you need help.

Dear Mr. Ferman:

My husband is at Aqueduct today, living in a motel by night, and says that he will be out of touch for at least a week, but I know he would have wanted me to acknowledge your letter, and as soon as he returns I assume he'll be in touch with you.

I assume also that in saying that he needs "help" you are referring to the fact that, as he told me, you were commissioning a story from him with money in front, and I hope that you can send us a check as soon as possible, without awaiting his return. He said something about a hundred or a thousand dollars, but we'll take fifty.

Joyce Malzberg

R. BRETNOR will be in F&SF's 25th Anniversary Issue - October 1974
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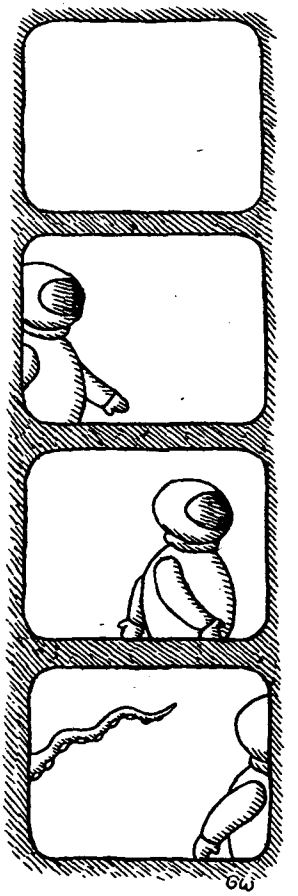
DAMN YOU, HARLAN ELLISON

The dichotomy between science fiction in print and sf in the film/TV media, as expressed in the eternal question, "Why aren't there more good sf movies?", is an interesting one, well worth a great deal more space than I have here. It's not simply that the public isn't ready for it; this used to be a valid (partial) answer, but no longer. Science fiction, whether it likes it or not, is becoming a field for the masses. But there are two other partial answers that *are* still valid; the one is obvious, literally staring the viewer in the face, the other less so — I'll touch on it later. But the obvious one, which a lot of people still haven't thought through, is that many of the various types of sf are terrifically expensive to produce. It is the mirror image of the historical epic; there a world of the past must be totally recreated; costumes, environment, everything. Much of science fiction requires the same thing, save that here it is not *re*creation. A world must be *created,* which implies talented designers rather than researchers, not to mention the whole area of special effects. And the era of multi-million dollar budgets for movies is gone, just when we needed it.

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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This perhaps too obvious point is brought up by the season's major TV entry in series sf, *The Starlost.* Created and with an initial script by Harlan Ellison, and with Douglas Trumbull (special effects on "2001" and director of "Silent Running") as executive producer and Ben Bova (editor of *Analog*) as technical advisor, it seemed a sure thing. Though at this writing I've only seen two episodes, I feel justified in saying that the sure thing got left at the post.

The situation as set up is this: about 500 years in the past, the Earth was destroyed. A great space ship, called The Ark, was launched. It is 1,000 miles long, and its population of three million is divided among a number of biospheres: domed, self-contained mini-worlds holding various samples of differing Earthly cultures plus a sizeable crew. Somewhere along the line, an accident destroys the crew, leaving the ship to proceed by itself and the biosphere cultures to develop in ignorance of their origins. In the first episode, Devon, a young man of the Amish biosphere, is ostracized because he is questioning, wondering, thoughtful and heretical; he also wants to marry a girl that he's not supposed to have. He goes through a door which no one else ever had the courage to enter, and — voila! — the corridors of The Ark. He finds a source of information, a sort of video cassette thing with a talking head that can, up to a point, answer questions (I was irresistibly reminded of Dorothy's first encounter with the Wizard), and learns The Truth. Considering that he is a good Amish boy who never even had to cope with zippers until then, he catches on fast, goes home to Tell All, is of course not believed, makes off with the girl, and is followed by the boy she was supposed to marry. And there are three of them, wandering the corridors of a derelict space ship, staring out at the stars, and wondering what to do about the fact that they're heading for a sun with which they'll collide in five years (another handy bit of information delivered by the talking head).

Episode two was pre-empted in my area by a ball game; I missed three; and four was so bad that I don't even want to go into it. The productions are handsome in the sort of way we've gotten used to since "2001"; acting is wooden; worst of all, there are the logic lapses and not-so-special special effects (amounting to sort of visual logic lapses) which are the usual major flaws of sf film.

Mr. Ellison has renounced the whole thing, which is why the "created by" credit is the *nom-de-screen* Cordwainer Bird. This is understandable...all the more so

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because he kindly lent me his *original* script for the first episode. Damn you, Harlan Ellison! Why'd you have to go and show me what could have been? It really hurts. Not only are all the logic lapses missing (for instance, Devon is shown in various stages of learning the situation from the holograph, implying that it took some time), but Ellison's visual directions are beautifully thought out (again, for instance: when Devon first sees the stars from the bridge, the camera pulls back and back and back until we see the real immensity of The Ark for the first time).

I have reason to believe that Ellison thought that these things could be realized on screen. Nevertheless, see paragraph one. There wouldn't seem to be a one-to-one relationship between cutting down production values and cutting the intelligence from a script, but there is a definite linkage. A nibble here, a nibble there. This scene goes because the extra set is expensive (but also contains a key exposition); that character goes because it's one less salary. And so it goes.

In paragraph one I mentioned a second major problem. That is that everything in so expensive a thing as a TV series or a movie is usually decided by a number of people; production companies, networks, even unions have their say. And it seems almost a law that unless there is the rare case of *one* guiding intelligence, the concept will be diluted. That is why Stanley Kubrick and Gene Roddenberry, in their very different ways, managed to make something successful. And, I would guess, why Cordwainer Bird (nee Harlan Ellison) didn't. But it was a damn good try.

Things-to-come-department... Various titles upcoming, without much further information: "The Star Wars" (directed by George Lucas of "THX-1138"), "Isoworg," "Zardoz," "Damnation Alley" (Trumbull again, on Zelazny's novel) and Woody Allen's "Young Frankenstein."...*Unabashed-plug-department...*I seem to be running this small bookshop devoted to fantasy and sf in New York City (56 8th Ave., to be exact). Drop in if you can.

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Vonda McIntyre is program coordinator of the University of Washington SF Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has appeared in *Orbit, Quark, Venture, Analog* and elsewhere, and she was the winner of an NAL short story contest in 1972.

The Mountains of Sunset, the Mountains of Dawn

by VONDA N. McINTYRE

The smell from the ship's animal room, at first tantalizing, grew to an overpowering strength. Years before, the odor of so many closely caged animals had sickened the old one, but now it urged on her slow hunger. When she had been a youth, hunger had demanded satiation, but now even her interior responses were aging. The hunger merely ached.

Inside the animal room, three dimensions of cages stretched up the floor's curvature, enclosing fat and lethargic animals that slept, unafraid. She lifted a young one by the back of its neck. Blinking, it hung in her hand; it would not respond in fear even when she extended her silver claws into its flesh. Its ancestors had run shrieking across the desert when the old one's shadow passed over them, but fear and speed and the chemical reactions of terror had been bred out of these beasts. Their meat was tasteless.

"Good day."

Startled, the old one turned. The youth's habit of approaching silently from behind was annoying; it made her fancy that her hearing was failing as badly as her sight. Still, she felt a certain fondness for this child, who was not quite so weak as the others. The youth was beautiful: wide wings and delicate ears, large eyes and triangular face, soft body-covering of fur as short as fur can be, patterned in tan against the normal lustrous black. The abnormality occurred among the first ship-generation's children. On the home world, any infant so changed would have been exposed, but on the sailship infanticide was seldom practiced. This the old one disapproved of, fearing a deterio-

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ration in her people, but she had grown used to the streaked and swirling fur pattern.

"I greet thee," she said, "but I'm hungry. Go away before I make thee ill."

"I've become accustomed to it," the youth said.

The old one shrugged, leaned down, and slashed the animal's throat with her sharp teeth. Warm blood spurted over her lips. As she swallowed it, she wished she were soaring and eating bits of warm meat from the fingers of a mate or a lover, feeding him in turn. Thus she, when still a youth and not yet "she," had courted her eldermate; thus her youngermate had never been able to court her. Two generations of her kind had missed that experience, but she seemed to regret the loss more than they did. She dismembered and gutted the animal and crunched its bones for marrow and brains.

She glanced up. The youth watched, seeming fascinated yet revolted. She offered a shred of meat.

"No. Thank you."

"Then eat thy meat cold, like the rest of them."

"I'll try it. Sometime."

"Yes, of course," the old one said. "And all our people will live on the lowest level and grow strong, and fly every day."

"I fly. Almost every day."

The old one smiled, half cynically, half with pity. "I would show thee what it is to fly," she said. "Across deserts so hot the heat snatches thee, and over mountains so tall they outreach clouds, and into the air until the radiation explodes in thy eyes and steals thy direction and shatters thee against the earth, if thou art not strong enough to overcome it."

"I'd like that."

"It's too late." The old wiped the clotting blood from her hands and lips. "It's much too late." She turned to leave; behind her, the youth spoke so softly that she almost did not hear. "It's my choice. Must you refuse me?"

She let the door close between them.

In the corridor, she passed others of her people, youths and adults made spindly by their existence on the inner levels of the ship, where the gravity was low. Many greeted her with apparent deference, but she believed she heard contempt. She ignored them. She had the right; she was the oldest of them all, the only one alive who could remember their home.

Her meal had not yet revived her; the slightly curved floor seemed to rise in fact rather than in appearance. The contempt she imagined in others grew in herself. It was past her time to die.

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Ladders connected the levels of the ship, in wells not designed for flying. With difficulty, the old one let herself down to the habitation's rim. She felt happier, despite the pain, when the centrifugal force increased her weight.

The voyage had been exciting, before she grew old. She had not minded trading hunting grounds for sailship cubicles: the universe lay waiting. She entered the ship young and eager, newly elder-mated, newly changed from youth to adult; loved, loving, sharing her people's dreams as they abandoned their small, dull world.

The old one's compartment was on the lowest level, where the gravity was greatest. Slowly, painfully, she sat cross-legged beside the window, unfolding her wings against the stiffness of her wing-fingers to wrap the soft membranes around her body. Outside, the stars raced by, to the old one's failing sight a multi-colored, swirling blur, like mica flakes in sand.

The habitation spun, and the sails came into view. The huge reflective sheets billowed in the pressure of the stellar winds, decelerating the ship and holding it against gravity as it approached the first new world the old one's people would ever see.

She dreamed of her youth, of flying high enough to see the planet's curvature, of skimming through high-altitude winds, gambling that no capricious current could overcome her and break her hollow bones. Other youths fell in their games; they died, but few mourned: that was the way of things.

She dreamed of her dead eldermate, and reached for him, but his form was insubstantial and slipped through her fingers.

Claws skittered against the door, waking her. Her dreams dissolved.

"Enter."

The door opened; against the dimness of her room light shadowed the one who stood there. The old one's eyes adjusted slowly; she recognized the piebald youth. She felt that she should send the youth away, but the vision of her eldermate lingered in her sight, and the words would not come.

"What dost thou wish?"

"To speak with you. To listen to you."

"If that's all."

"Of course it isn't. But if it's all you will allow, I will accept it."

The old one unwrapped her wings and sat slowly up. "I outlived my youngermate," she said. "Wouldst thou have me disgust our people again?"

"They don't care. It isn't like that any more. We've changed."

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"I know...my children have forgotten our customs, and I have no right to criticize. Why should they listen to a crippled parent who refuses to die?"

The youth heel-sat before her, silent for a moment. "I wish..."

She stretched out her hand, extending the sharp claws. "Our people should never have left our home. I would long be dead, and thou wouldst not have met me."

The youth took her hand and grasped it tightly. "If you were dead —"

She drew back, opening long fingers so her wing spread across her body. "I will die," she said. "Soon. But I want to fly again. I will see one new world, and then I will have seen enough."

"I wish you wouldn't talk of dying."

"Why? Why have we become so frightened of death?"

The youth rose, shrugging, and let the tips of the striped wings touch the floor. The vestigial claws clicked against the metal. "Maybe we're not used to it any more."

The old one perceived the remark's unconscious depth. She smiled, and began to laugh. The youth looked at her, as if thinking her mad. But she could not explain what was so funny, that they had reached for the perils of the stellar winds, and found only safety and trepidation.

"What's the matter? Are you all right? What is it?"

"Nothing," she said. "Thou wouldst not understand." She no longer felt like laughing, but exhausted and ill. "I will sleep," she said, having regained her dignity. She turned her gaze from the beautiful youth.

Waking, she felt warm, as if she were sleeping in the sun on a pinnacle of rock with the whole world spreading out around her. But her cheek rested against chill metal; she opened her eyes knowing once more where she was.

The youth lay beside her, asleep, wing outstretched across them both. She started to speak but remained silent. She felt she should be angry, but the closeness was too pleasurable. Guilt sprang up, at allowing this child to retain desire for the love of one about to die, but still the old one did not move. She lay beneath the caressing wing, seeking to recapture her dreams. But the youth shifted, and the old one found herself looking into dark, gold-flecked, startled eyes.

The youth pulled away. "I am sorry. I meant only to warm you, not to..."

"I...found it pleasant, after so long in this cold metal I thank thee."

The youth gazed at her, realizing gradually what she had

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said, then lay down and gently enfolded her again.

"Thou art a fool. Thou dost seek pain."

The youth rested against her, head on her shoulder.

"I will only call thee 'thee,'" she said.

"All right."

The flying chamber enclosed half the levels of a segment two twelfths of the habitation wide. Its floor and its side walls were transparent to space.

The old one and the youth stood on a brilliant path of stars. On one side of them, the sails rippled as they changed position to hold the ship on course. They obscured a point of light only slightly brighter than the stars that formed its background: the sun of the home planet, the star this ship and a thousand like it had abandoned. On the other side, a second star flared bright, and even the old one could see the changing phases of the spheres that circled it.

The youth stared out at the illuminated edge of their destination. "Will you be happy there?"

"I'll be happy to see the sky and the land again."

"A blue sky, without stars...I think that will be very empty."

"We became used to this ship," the old one said. "We can go back again as easily." She turned, spread her wings, ran a few steps, and lifted herself into the air. The takeoff felt clumsy, but the flying was more graceful.

She glided, spiraling upward on the gravity gradient. To fly higher with less and less effort had been strange and exciting; now she only wished for a way to test her strength to the breaking point. Her distance perception had weakened with time, but she knew the dimensions of the chamber by kinesthetic sense and memory: long enough to let one glide, but not soar, wide enough to let one stroke slowly from one side to the next, but not tax one's muscles with speed, deep enough to let one swoop, but not dive.

At the top of the chamber, she slid through the narrow space between ceiling and walking bridge; she heard the youth, behind her, falter, then plunge through. The old one had laughed, when they built the crossing, but there were those who could not cross the chamber without the bridge, and that she did not find amusing.

Sound guided her. Sometimes she wished to plug her ears and fly oblivious to the echoes that marked boundaries. She had considered dying that way, soaring with senses half crippled until she crashed against the thick tapestry of stars and blessed the sailship with her blood. But she wanted to touch the

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earth again; so she continued to live.

She grew tired; her bones would ache when she had rested. She dipped her wings and slipped toward the floor, stretching to combat the rising end of the gradient. She landed; her wings drooped around her. The youth touched down and approached her. "I am tired."

She appreciated the concession to her dignity. "I, too."

The days passed; the youth stayed with her. They flew together, and they sailed the long-deserted ion boats in the whirlpools of converging stellar winds. At first fearful, the youth gained confidence as the old one demonstrated the handling of the sails. The old one recalled other, half-forgotten voyages with other, long-dead youths. Her companion's growing pleasure made her briefly glad that her dream of dying properly, veiled and soaring, had kept her from taking one of the boats and sailing until the air ran out or some accident befell her.

When the features of the new world could be discerned, the old one made the long walk to the navigation room. Her eyes no longer let her feel the stars, and so she did not navigate, yet though the young people could guide the ship as well as her generation had, she felt uneasy leaving her fate in the hands of others. From the doorway, she pushed off gently and floated to the center of the chamber. A few young adults drifted inside the transparent hemisphere, talking, half dozing, watching the relationships between ship, planet, primary, and stars. The navigation room did not rotate; directions were by convention. Streaked with clouds, glinting with oceans, the crescent world loomed above them; below, the ship's main body spun, a reflective expanse spotted with dark ports and the transparent segment of the flying chamber.

"Hello, grandmother."

"Hello, grandchild." She should call him "grandson," she thought, but she was accustomed to the other, though this child of her first child, already youngermated, had long been adult. She felt once more that she should choose a graceful way to die.

Nearby, two people conferred about a few twelfths of a second of arc and altered the tension on the main sail lines. Like a concave sheet of water, the sail rippled and began to fold.

"It seems the engines will not be necessary." They had begun the turn already; the stars were shifting around them.

He shrugged, only his shoulders, not his wings. "Perhaps just a

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little." He gazed at her for a long time without speaking. "Grandmother, you know the planet is smaller than we thought."

She looked up at the white-misted, half-shadowed globe. "Not a great deal, surely."

"Considerably. It's much denser for its mass than our world was. The surface gravity will be higher."

"How much?"

"Enough that our people would be uncomfortable."

The conditional, by its implications, frightened her. "Our people are weak," she said. "Have the council suggest they move to the first level."

"No one would, grandmother." Though he never flew, he sounded sad.

"You are saying we will not land?"

"How can we? No one could live."

"No one?"

"You are old, grandmother."

"And tired of sailing. I want to fly again."

"No one could fly on that world."

"How can you say? You don't even fly in the chamber."

He stared down at the shimmering, half-folded sails. "I fly with them. Those are all the wings our people need."

The old one flexed her wing-fingers; the membranes opened, closed, opened. "Is that what everyone believes?"

"It's true. The sails have carried us for two generations. Why should we abandon them now?"

"How can we depend on them so heavily? Grandson, we came onto this ship to test ourselves, and you're saying we will avoid the test."

"The ambitions and needs of a people can change."

"And the instincts?"

She knew what his answer would be before he did. "Even those, I think."

The old one looked out over space. She could not navigate, but she could evaluate their trajectory. It was never meant to be converted into an orbit. The ship would swing around the planet, catapult past it, and sail on.

"We felt trapped by a whole world," the old one said. "How can our children be satisfied on this uninteresting construct?"

"Please try to understand. Try to accept the benefits of our security." He touched her hand, very gently, his claws retracted. "I'm sorry."

She turned away from him, forced by the lack of gravity to use clumsy swimming motions. She returned to the low regions of the habitation, feeling amost physically wounded by the decision not to

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land. The ship could sustain her life no longer.

The youth was in her room. "Shall we fly?"

She hunched in the corner near the window. "There is no reason to fly."

"What's happened?" The youth crouched beside her.

"Thou must leave me and forget me. I will be gone by morning."

"But I'm coming."

She took the youth's hand, extending her silver claws against the patterned black-and-tan fur. "No one else is landing. Thou wouldst be left alone."

The youth understood her plans. "Stay on the ship." The tone was beyond pleading.

"It doesn't matter what I do. If I stay, I will die, and thou wilt feel grief. If I leave, thou wilt feel the same grief. But if I allow thee to come, I will steal thy life."

"It's my life."

"Ah," she said sadly, "thou art so young."

The old one brought out a flask of warm red wine. As the sky spun and tumbled beside them. She and the youth shared the thick, salty liquid, forgetting their sorrows as the intoxicant went to their heads. The youth stroked the old one's cheek and throat and body. "Will you do one thing for me before you leave?"

"What dost thou wish?"

"Lie with me. Help me make the change."

With the wine, she found herself half amused by the youth's persistence and naivete. "That is something thou shouldst do with thy mate."

"I have to change soon, and there's no one else I want to court."

"Thou dost seek loneliness."

"Will you help me?"

"I told thee my decision when thou asked to stay."

The youth seemed about to protest again, but remained silent. The old one considered the easy capitulation, but the strangeness slipped from her as she drank more wine. Stroking her silver claws against her companion's patterned temple, she allowed her vision to unfocus among the swirls of tan, but she did not sleep.

When she had set herself for her journey, she slipped away. She felt some regret when the youth did not stir, but she did not want another argument; she did not want to be cruel again. As she neared the craft bay, excitement overcame disappointment; this was her first adventure in many years.

She saw no one, for the bay was on the same level as her room. She entred a small power craft, sealed it, gave orders to the bay. The machinery worked smoothly, de-

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spite lack of use or care. The old one could understand the young people's implicit trust in the ship; her generation had built seldom, but very well. The air gone, she opened the hatch. The craft fell out into space.

Her feeling for the workings of the power craft returned. Without numbers or formulae she set its course; her vision was not so bad that she could not navigate in harbors.

Following gravity, she soon could feel the difference between this world and the home planet; not, she thought, too much. She crossed the terminator into daylight, where swirls of cloud swept by beneath her. She anticipated rain, cool on her face and wings, pushed in rivulets down her body by the speed of her flight. Without the old one's conscious direction, her wing fingers opened slightly, closed, opened.

She watched the stars as her motion made them rise. Refraction gave her the approximate density of the air: not, she thought, too low.

The ship dipped into the outer atmosphere. Its stubby wings slowed it; decelerating, it approached the planet's surface, fighting the differences of this world, which yielded, finally, to the old one's determination. She looked for a place to land.

The world seemed very young; for a long while she saw only thick jungles and marshes. Finally, between mountain ranges that blocked the clouds, she found a desert. It was alien in color and form, but the sand glittered with mica like the sand of home. She landed the ship among high dunes.

The possibility had always existed that the air, the life, the very elements would be lethal. She broke the door's seal; air hissed sharply. She breathed fresh air for the first time in two generations. It was thin, but it had more oxygen than she was used to, and made her light-headed. The smells teased her to identify them. She climbed to the warm sand, and slowly, slowly, spread her wings to the gentle wind.

Though the land pulled at her, she felt she could overcome it. Extending her wings to their limits, she ran against the breeze. She lifted, but not enough; her feet brushed the ground, and she was forced to stop.

The wind blew brown sand and mica flakes against her feet and drooping wingtips. "Be patient to bury me," she said. "You owe me more than a grave."

She started up the steep face of a nearby dune. The sand tumbled grain over grain in tiny avalanches from her footsteps. She was used to feeling lighter as she rose; here, she only grew more tired. She approached the knife-edged crest,

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where sunlight sparkled from each sand crystal. The delicate construct collapsed past her, pouring sand into her face. She had to stop and blink until her eyes were clear of grit, but she had kept her footing. She stood at the broken summit of the dune, with the saillike crests that remained stretched up and out to either side. Far above the desert floor, the wind blew stronger. She looked down, laughed, spread her wings, and leaped.

The thin air dropped her; she struggled; her feet brushed the sand, but her straining wings held her and she angled toward the sky, less steeply than of old, but upward. She caught an updraft and followed it, spiraling in a wide arc, soaring past the shadowed hills of sand. This flight was less secure than those of her memories; she felt intoxicated by more than the air. She tried a shallow dive and almost lost control, but pulled herself back into the sky. She was not quite ready to give life up. She no longer felt old, but ageless.

Motion below caught her attention. She banked and glided over the tiny figure. It scuttled away when her shadow touched it, but it seemed incapable of enough speed to make a chase exhilarating. Swooping with some caution, she skimmed the ground, snatched up the animal in her hand-fingers, and soared again. Thrashing, the scaly beast cried out gutturally. The old one inspected it. It had a sharp but not unpleasant odor, one of the mysterious scents of the air. She was not hungry, but she considered killing and eating the creature. It smelled like something built of familiar components of life, though along a completely alien pattern. She was curious to know if her system could tolerate it, and she wondered what color its blood was, but her people's tradition and instinct was to kill lower animals only for food. She released the cold beast where she had found it and she soared away.

The old one climbed into the air for one final flight. She felt deep sorrow that the young ones would not stop here.

At first, she thought she was imagining the soft, keening whine, but it grew louder, higher, until she recognized the shriek of a power craft. It came into view, flying very fast, too fast — but it struggled, slowed, leveled, and it was safe. It circled toward the old one's craft. She followed.

From the air, she watched the youth step out into the sand. She landed nearby.

"Why didst thou come? I will not go back."

The youth showed her ankle bands and multicolored funeral veils. "Let me attend your death. At least let me do that."

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"That is a great deal."

"Will you allow it?"

"Thou hast exposed thyself to great danger. Canst thou get back?"

"If I want to."

"Thou must. There is nothing here for thee."

"Let me decide that!" The youth's outburst faltered. "Why... why do you pretend to care so much about me?"

"I —" she had no answer. Her concern was no pretense, but she realized that her actions and her words had been contradictory. She had changed, perhaps as much as the young ones, keeping the old disregard for death to herself, applying the new conservation of life to others. "I do care," she said. "I do care about you."

And the youth caught his breath at her use of the adult form of address. "I've hoped for so long you might say that," he said. "I've wanted your love for such a long time...."

"You will only have it for a little while."

"That is enough."

They embraced. The old one folded her wings over him, and they sank down into the warm sand. For the first time, they touched with love and passion. As the sun struck the sharp mountains and turned the desert maroon, the old one stroked the youth and caressed his face, holding him as he began the change. The exerior alterations would be slight. The old one felt her lover's temperature rising, as his metabolism accelerated to trigger the hormonal changes.

"I feel very weak," the youth whispered.

"That is usual. It passes."

He relaxed within her wings.

The sun set, the land grew dim; the moons, full, rose in tandem. The stars formed a thick veil above the fliers. They lay quietly together, the old one stroking her lover to ease the tension in his muscles, helping maintain his necessary fever with the insulation of her wings. The desert grew cool with the darkness; sounds moved and scents waxed and waned with the awakening of nocturnal creatures. The world seemed more alien at night.

"Are you there?" His eyes were wide open, but the pupils were narrow slits, and the tendons in his neck stood out, strained.

"Of course."

"I didn't know it would hurt...I'm glad you're here...."

"We all survive the passage," she said gently. But something about this world or the changing one himself made this transition difficult.

She held him all night while he muttered and thrashed, oblivious to her presence. As dawn approached,

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he fell into a deep sleep, and the old one felt equally exhausted. The sun dimmed the veil of stars and warmed the fliers; the creatures that had crept around them during darkness returned to their hiding places. The old one left her lover and began to climb a dune.

When she returned, the new adult was awakening. She landed behind him; he heard her and turned. His expression changed from grief to joy.

"How do you feel?"

He rubbed his hands down the back of his neck. "I don't know. I feel...new."

She sat on her heels beside him. "I was hungry afterwards," she said. She held up a squirming pair of the reptiles. "But I didn't have to wonder if the food would kill me." She slashed one creature's throat. The blood was brilliant yellow, its taste as sharp as the smell. She sampled the flesh: it was succulent and strong after the mushy, flavorless meat on the ship. "It's good." She offered him a piece of the meat she held. "I feel you can eat it safely." He regarded it a moment, but took the second beast and bit through its scales and skin. It convulsed once and died.

"A clean kill," she said.

He smiled at her, and they feasted.

He stood and spread his wings, catching a soft hot breeze.

"We *can* fly here," the old one said.

He ran a few steps and launched himself into the air. She watched him climb, astonished and delighted that he needed no assistance. He seemed unsure of distances and angles, unsteady on turns and altitude changes, but that would have improved if he had had the time. She heard him laugh with joy; he called to her.

Wishing she were still strong, she climbed the dune again and joined him. All that day they flew together; she taught him to hunt, and they fed each other; they landed and lay together in the sand.

Twilight approached.

The old one ached in every bone. She had imagined, as the air supported her, that she might somehow escape her age, but the ground dragged at her, and she trembled.

"It's time," she said.

Her lover started as if she had struck him. He started to protest, but stopped, and slipped his wings around her. "I will attend you."

He walked with her up the dune, carrying the veils. At the top, he fastened the bands around her fingers and ankles. The old one spread her wings and fell into the air. She flew toward the mountains

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of sunrise until darkness engulfed her and the stars seemed so close that she might pull them across her shoulders. Her lover flew near.

"What will you do?"

"I'll go back to the ship."

"That's good."

"I may be able to persuade a few to return with me."

She thought of his loneliness, if he were refused and returned nonetheless, but she said nothing of that. "I respect your decision."

She climbed higher, until the air grew perceptibly thinner, but she could not fly high enough for cosmic rays to burst against her retinas. She took comfort in the clear sky and in flying, and plucked a veil from her companion. After that, he slipped them into the bands, staying near enough for danger. She felt the cold creeping in; the veils drifted about her like snow. "Good-by, my love," she said. "Do not grieve for me."

Her senses were dimmed; she could barely hear him. "I have no regrets, but I will grieve."

The old one stretched out her stiffening wings and flew on.

He followed her until he knew she was dead, then dropped back. She would continue to some secret grave; he wished to remember her as she had been that day.

He glided alone over the desert and in the treacherous currents of mountains' flanks, impressing the world on his mind so he could describe its beauties. At dawn, he returned to his craft. A breeze scattered tiny crystals against his ankles.

He dropped to his knees and thrust his fingers into the bright, warming sand. Scooping up a handful, he wrapped it in the last silver funeral veil and carried it with him when he departed.

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Raylyn Moore's new story concerns a Strange Child who finds the truth in the oddest places . . .

Shoes

by RAYLYN MOORE

While Mrs. Baumgartner was talking, Vilia looked down at her own feet. She could hear the children screaming.

"For the past three afternoons," Mrs. Baumgartner said, waggling the same bony forefinger she used for jabbing at words on the chalkboard, "you have sneaked off the schoolbus at the wrong stop. Why do you do these naughty things?"

Vilia's shoes were black patent leather with toes like dark mirrors. She never polished them; they never needed it. They grew shinier, cleaner, clearer all the time.

"Why?" Mrs. Baumgartner insisted.

"Because —" Vilia began, and then thought better of it. Every time she had ever tried to explain the truth to an adult, the result had only been more punishment. Yet lying was wrong too, everyone said so. Finally she said, "Can't you hear the children screaming, Mrs. Baumgartner?"

The fourth-grade teacher of Cottonwood Rural Elementary looked exasperated. "Of course I can hear the children screaming. What a question! And that brings up something else I've been meaning to speak to you about, Vilia, your lack of attention especially when your elders are addressing you, your dreamy habit of woolgathering constantly, in class and everywhere else. You're a strange child, a perverse child, Your Aunt Myra was quite right to warn me about you the first day she brought you to school."

"Yes, ma'am," said Vilia politely.

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"Now, the subject we are discussing here is not the noise to be heard from the playground, but your serious infraction of our strict rule that the school district is responsible for each student until the moment he or she *is delivered to the bus stop nearest his or her home.* No child is permitted to leave the bus before the proper stop unless there is a written note signed by a parent — or in your case a guardian — allowing the child to visit at some other house. Is that clear?"

Vilia nodded and looked out the open window at the late autumn afternoon, which was heavy with sunshine and the smell of distant wood smoke. So the children Mrs. Baumgartner heard were only the ones outside jumping, skipping, running, pummeling, and occasionally colliding as they waited for the schoolbuses to come back from taking the early loads home. Mrs. Baumgartner didn't understand anything at all.

When the teacher rolled the chair back from her desk and stood up, Vilia could see the familiar tight red pumps with slightly runover heels. Mrs. Baumgartner had thick legs and ankles, so that the red pumps looked as if they must have been made for someone else. Yet she wore them nearly every day, and they went clack-snack-snack. clack-snack-snack to and fro over the bare wood floor at the front of the fourth-grade classroom.

"Very well, you may go. I shouldn't need to say, however, that if you don't heed my warning about the bus this time, very painful measures will be taken, both by the school and your Aunt Myra, with whom I have spoken this afternoon by telephone." Mrs. Baumgartner puffed herself up into her most threatening posture. "What will happen to you then, Vilia, will make all the other punishments you've received so far this term seem like a round of drop the hanky."

Outside Vilia stood alone beside the science club project, a glass terrarium with a controlled inside atmosphere. She quietly studied her toes. A small breeze ruffled her dark-brown bangs, pressed the worn red plaid dress, a hand-me-down from a neighbor of Aunt Myra's, against her small, thin body. Suddenly, her eyes still on her shoes, Vilia crouched down and buried her face tightly in her arms. A split second later the hardball, driving at bullet speed, exploded against the side of the terrarium nearest Vilia. For a moment afterward it rained glass splinters.

There was a shocked silence in the schoolyard, then a mounting hubbub, a confusion of running feet.

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Mrs. Baumgartner's shrill voice carried over all the noise. "I've told you and *told* you," she hollered, "not to play ball on this side of the playground. Who threw that ball? Come, speak out. A child has been injured by broken glass. Who's responsible? Who has done this terrible thing?"

Slowly, Vilia rose from her squatting position, uncovering her face. "I'm not hurt, Mrs. Baumgartner."

"Well, I declare. I saw you from the window just a second ago standing by the terrarium, and then I heard the crash and saw you holding your face. What was I to think? What is the meaning of this?" In an instant all the teacher's anger against the culprit who had thrown the ball seemed to revert to Vilia. "What *is* the matter with you anyway? Why can't you stay out of trouble? Wherever you are, accidents seem to happen, don't they? You needn't try to deny it. Your aunt has told me plenty about what went on where you lived before you moved here. You'd better learn to behave, that's all. Let this be a final warning."

This time after Mrs. Baumgartner had withdrawn, Vilia walked to the end of the concrete path where the bus stop was. She returned her attention to her shoes and her interrupted thought. The ball coming in her direction had been a nothing. Child's play. The more important thing was still there, waiting to happen. And the worst of it was she had no way of knowing exactly when.

The bus with the number three on its yellow side rumbled in, balloon tires biting fiercely at the gravel. The children who lived out along the pike and the Old Quarry Road were queuing up behind Vilia.

Tommy Williams shoved her in the back. "For a minute there I was sure you'd been kilt by that ball, Veel," he said, and laughed at the humor of his remark.

"Don't be silly," she said.

He tried another thrust. "If you can't remember where you live at tonight, just ask me. I'll tell you where to get off." He hooted like a boat.

Vilia glanced with mild interest at Tommy's ruined rubber-and-canvas shoes and then up at his round brown eyes in a round freckled face. Tommy, a sixth grader, lived in her own neighborhood, on the first farm past the freight tracks leading into the quarry. They had played together some weekends, and one day at school when she forgot her lunch, he had shared with her. She owed him for that anyway. "Tommy, listen a minute. I want to tell you something."

"Okay, tell me something,"

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Tommy said mockingly and gave Vilia's ponytail a hard yank. It was the thing she hated most. She couldn't abide having her hair touched by anybody but herself. So even though she knew Tommy's gesture was half friendly, she bounded furiously away from him and up the steps of the bus. Let him save himself then, if he could. However, even preoccupied with anger, Vilia did not fail to think of taking an aisle seat toward the front, to be ready.

"Well, well," Mr. Burton said, turning clear around in the driver's seat and grinning vaguely at her through tobacco-brown teeth. "If it ain't our little troublemaker. I been told to keep a sharp eye on you, miss."

Vilia smiled sweetly back, glad to see Mr. Burton because he was the relief driver and hadn't been on the bus since a week ago. Though he must have been told something about her, Vilia guessed that by this time he had forgotten the gist of it and was even now trying to remember exactly why she was supposed to be watched. It was going to be touch and go with Mr. Burton over whether he would recall in time to stop her.

The bus doors wheezed, closing the last child inside with the murky smells of wool and dirty lunchboxes. Opening windows was against the rules. In Vilia's chest, the familiar slow wings of terror began to beat for being trapped in the Number Three.

Going down the pike, the bus gathered speed, but then had to slow to let the first bunch of children off. Mr. Burton had a reputation around the school for being a reckless driver, which was why he drove only relief days and not as a regular. People said he had had a bad accident in his own car not long ago, and the school board was reviewing his case. With a roar of gears he turned off onto the Old Quarry Road, where there was less traffic, and stepped up the speed again. The wrinkles on the back of his fat red neck seemed to smooth out. He slouched in his seat a little and even began to whistle.

The bus stopped to let out the Carpenters at the first crossroads, Polly Hartsock at her lane, and the Blacklocks at their mailbox.

Vilia was alone in the double seat, for no one had joined her, and this was a good thing, she decided. From her eye corners she watched the yellow-haired Lamb children gathering up their books and lunchboxes. There were six Lambs. One more among them wouldn't be noticed. Mr. Burton stopped the bus at the next-to-last place before the railroad tracks. It was still nearly two miles to where Vilia lived.

When the Lambs started down

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the aisle, she slid into the procession and was almost through the bus door when Tommy Williams' voice rose from the back of the bus: "Hey, there goes Vilia again!"

"Just a darn minute there, sis," Mr. Burton said, setting the brake. The Lambs had stared at her first, surprised to have her with them, but now they made no move to try to stop her. Instead, they closed ranks and kept moving until the little group was clear of the bus steps. Then Vilia left the Lambs standing there with their mouths open and began to run as hard as she could across the stubble of a cleared field.

Vilia ran and ran and Mr. Burton ran and ran, but Vilia was light-footed in her shiny black shoes while Mr. Burton was weighted down by engineer's boots with heavy raised heels and soles nearly an inch thick. She gained the woods at the far edge of the field and heard the shouts behind her change from, "Stop, you little devil, stop!" to, "Okay, all you kids back there on the road. Nobody said for you to get out of the bus, did they? Back in there now, every one of you."

Panting, Vilia stretched on her stomach among the trees, digging her elbows into the layers of leaves. From far off she heard the bus doors wheeze shut, and when she looked out toward the road again, the yellow bus was just disappearing over the hill.

For a long time she stayed where she was, shaking now and then, and sobbing a little because she felt very sure now that this would be the time and she was sorry she had been so mad at Tommy. He hadn't meant any harm, and if she had told him what she knew, he just might have believed her and could have gotten off with her and the Lambs.

In the parlor, which was dusky from the shades having already been drawn, Aunt Myra was entertaining her best friend Mrs. Trimue and was too preoccupied to notice that Vilia was again late getting home. The cotton print knees of the two ladies were touching under the ouija board, and their four plump hands rested lightly together on the slowly circling planchette.

"Aunt Myra," Vilia began, after remembering to close the sliding parlor doors after herself to keep out the hall draft.

"Don't pester," Aunt Myra directed sharply, and Mrs. Trimue's bread-crust face echoed the order. Mrs. Trimue had the gift of the occult, everyone said. Her pale-blue eyes were empty now, her head cocked, as if she was hearing something no one else could hear.

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For a moment no one said anything more.

Then, after revolving in a halting, aimless way, the planchette seemed to pick up speed and direction, began almost racing from one letter to another. The thrall of tension pulled Vilia closer in spite of herself. "Is the board saying something?" she whispered.

The planchette journeyed to the final "t" and then swooped off onto the carpet with a thud. Aunt Myra and Mrs. Trimue locked glances. "So that's it," Aunt Myra said in an awed way. "Imagine finding out a thing like that before anyone else knows. Probably before it's even happened. It's uncanny, that's what it is."

"It's only a small sample of what's possible for a chosen few of us," Mrs. Trimue said modestly, taking all the credit. "A talent for prescience is rare, but we who can see into the future know —"

"Know what?" Vilia demanded before she thought. "Please! What did the board say?"

"Don't interrupt your elders, Vilia," Aunt Myra said even more formidably than usual. "Leave the room immediately, and don't forget to close the doors after you. I'll deal with you later, young lady."

"Pregnant," Vilia heard as she went out of the room. "Irma Oakes is going to get pregnant after all these years of barrenness. And I'll bet she doesn't even know it yet herself."

In the sitting room off the kitchen Uncle Coulous was watching the news on television. His feet, in big rubber overshoes, were thrust out in front of him. No matter what the weather, Uncle Coulous always wore those overshoes indoors and out, through every season. They were caked over with ancient and modern mud and gave out, as he walked, a symphony of unfastened buckles.

Desperately, Vilia moved between him and the screen, where a newscaster was saying that the Paris correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* had reported that many of the neutralist countries were having high-level discussions with a number of nations known to be committed to anti-American policy. Among those involved were certain Arab states and some African countries which resented not having received foreign aid. Reaction to the story around Washington, the newscaster asserted, seemed to be a general optimism that the crisis would blow over in the same manner as similar crises in the past.

"Uncle Coulous," Vilia said, "there's something I have to tell you."

"Move," Uncle Coulous squawked. "You'd make a better door than a window. Get away,

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child. Don't bother me when the news is on."

Vilia pirouetted obediently away and picked up the evening paper from beside her uncle's chair. Running down the left side of the local daily's front page was an editorial column titled "We Predict —" which Vilia now scanned anxiously. Some of the words were too hard for her, but the ideas were all clear. For one thing, Mr. Yount the editor was foretelling that the county would pass the year without a single traffic fatality, his optimism based on the remarkable fact that ten months had already elapsed without accident.

In dismay Vilia let the paper plop to the floor, but Uncle Coulous didn't even look up. She tiptoed up the back stairs to Aunt Opal's room. Opal was Myra's oldest sister, which made her no more a real aunt to Vilia than Myra, who technically was a foster parent. But occasionally Opal had been friendly with Vilia, and sometimes she shared the chocolate she kept in her room. Aunt Opal hooked beautiful rugs all day and came down only for meals.

Tonight however Aunt Opal was in a waspish mood. "Hold your head up, Vilia," she said, squinting up sideways from her current rug as Vilia came in. "Don't be always looking down at your shoes like that."

Vilia looked at Aunt Opal's shoes, sturdy orthopedics with strong laces and "sensible" heels, the same kind favored by Aunt Myra and also Mrs. Trimue. There seemed to be no one at all around with shoes exactly like Vilia's own.

But since Opal didn't seem to care whether she had company or not, Vilia went out and crouched among the shadows on the back stairs, waiting for the telephone to ring.

It did at almost the same time Uncle Coulous' newscaster interrupted himself to read something new off the wire about a bad accident in a rural part of the state. So Vilia, on the stairs, heard the story double, partly off the television and partly from Uncle Coulous, who bellowed in to Aunt Myra and Mrs. Trimue what he'd heard on the phone. Numbers were repeated. Twenty children. Number three bus. Four o'clock. "...Cottonwood Rural Elementary School," said the man on the television. "...struck broadside by a freight train moving along an infrequently used spur track to a quarry...crossing lights possibly defective...investigation."

Disaster was not a new experience to Vilia, though she had never quite become accustomed to it even after all she had seen. At her last foster home two little girls had drowned. (They had scoffed at her

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instead of listening, and Vilia had stepped ashore from the forbidden, leaky boat minutes before it sank in the middle of the lake.) And before that, watching from a safe distance in the yard, she had seen the house with her real parents in it burning to the ground. (Earlier that evening, when she had tried to warn them, she had been sent to bed without supper.)

Unnoticed now, because of all the excitement in the house caused by the news, Vilia crept back to the room where Uncle Coulous had been. The television blared on unheeded now. She picked up the paper again to finish reading Mr. Yount's predictions. It seemed he had more on his mind than the accident-free year on the county's highways. He was thinking bigger in the rest of his column. "Prophets have long been expecting the end of the human race," Vilia read. "Some have thought the end would come from overcrowding and pollution, some by nuclear holocaust. But to your prophesying editor, it looks as if we're going to be around for a while after all."

Wrong again, thought Vilia, looking deep into her shiny shoes for the truth. She put her fingers into her ears because the new sounds were already beginning, and they would be far, far worse than any she had heard before.

This time Vilia didn't think she could even save herself.

Coming Soon

Next month: New novelets by Gordon Eklund and Robert F. Young.

April: Robert Silverberg issue, featuring "Born With The Dead," a new 30,000 word novella which will certainly be counted among Silverberg's finest works. Profile, critical essay, bibliography. Use the coupon on page 160.

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DANCE OF THE LUMINARIES

Very much of my life is spent in trying to decide how best to explain rather complicated phenomena in such a way that people can understand without suffering too much pain in the process.

There are times when I feel sorry for myself for having to work at this task, and I worry about the strain imposed on the delicate structure of my brain. Whenever that happens, though, I remember that I am dealing with an audience that *wants* to understand and is anxious to meet me half-way. There then follows an upwelling of gratitude for all my Gentle Readers that drowns any feeling of self-pity I may have been experiencing.

After all, what if my life-style had forced me into missionary endeavors designed to convert *hostile* audiences. Surely I would get nothing but beatings for my pains.

For instance, I will not conceal from you my lack of sympathy for the tenets of Christian Science. I'm sure Christian Scientists are fine people, and I would not for worlds interfere with their happiness, but I cannot make myself accept their denial of the reality of the phenomenal or material world. I

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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don't believe that disease, to take an example, is not real and that it can be removed by faith or prayer.*

Consider, then, that immediately across the street from the apartment house in which I live is a Christian Science church. And consider further that on Sunday mornings in the summer there is a steady menacing roar that I can hear even through closed windows. When I first became aware of this, I asked questions in alarm, and was told that it was the fan of the large air-conditioner used by the said church.

Naturally, I laughed loud and long at the thought that the congregation should incorporate into the architectural structure of their house of worship a device that so thoroughly refuted everything they had to say. If the material world is not real and if the faithful Christian Scientist can by prayer eliminate disease, cannot a whole churchful of them pray away the sensation of heat? Do they need to bow to the material by installing an air-conditioner?

But I laughed also out of relief that I felt no impulse to go into the church and lecture them on this. Let it go! I would but get myself smashed into kindling if I tried.

I am so glad that my impulse, instead, is to follow up last month's article by explaining to you the reason why there are so few eclipses of the Sun, and how it was that the ancients could predict them.

To have an eclipse, the Moon has to be in front of the Sun, as viewed from the Earth, so let's begin by considering the relative positions of the Moon and the Sun as we see them.

As the Moon revolves about the Earth, it is sometimes on the same side of us as the Sun is, and sometimes on the opposite side. When the Moon is on the opposite side of the Earth from the Sun, Sunlight goes past the Earth to shine on the Moon. If we look at the Moon, then, with the Sunlight coming over our shoulder toward it, so to speak, we see the entire side of the Moon, facing us, to be illuminated. We see a complete circle of light, and are looking at the "full Moon."

If, on the other hand, the Moon is on the same side of the Earth as the Sun is, it is between the Sun and the Earth (since it is much closer to us than the Sun is), and we don't see it at all, for it is in the full glare of the Sun. Even if we could somehow block out that glare, we couldn't see the

Yes, I know cures have been reported. Cures have been reported for every conceivable kind of treatment. But what's the overall batting average?

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moon because it would be the side away from us that would be receiving the light of the Sun. The side toward us would be dark.

When the Moon moves a little to the east of the Sun (as it progresses west-to-east in its orbit about the Earth), we begin to see a bit of the Sunlit side. This we see as a narrow crescent, but only when the Sun is not in the sky. After the Sun has set, the crescent Moon is briefly visible in the western sky at twilight before it, too, sets. Ancient man thought of it as a "new Moon" ready to go through another month-long cycle of phases, and that phrase has come to be applied to the Moon when it is between us and the Sun.

As the Moon moves around the Earth, the visible crescent grows steadily until we see a full Moon, and then the lighted portion shrinks steadily until we have a new Moon again.

The time from one new Moon to the next is a little less than a calendar month (I'll get into exact figures later), so that in the space of a little less than a year there are twelve new Moons. About one year in three, the first new Moon comes so early in the year that there is time for a thirteenth new Moon before the end of the year.

If we have an eclipse only when the Moon is in front of the Sun, the eclipse must come at the time of the new Moon, for it is then that the condition is fulfilled. In that case, though, why isn't there an eclipse of the Sun at *every* new Moon? Why aren't there twelve eclipses every year, and in one year out of three thirteen of them?

To see the answer to that, let's approach the problem from a different direction.

The Earth goes around the Sun in 365.24220 days. As it moves in its orbit, we see the Sun against a progressively different part of the starry background.* Therefore, it seems to us that the Sun, moving steadily west to east, makes a complete circle of the sky in 365.24220 days. This circular path, which the Sun seems to mark out against the sky in the course of the year, divides the sky into two equal halves and is therefore called a "great circle." The particular great circle the Sun follows is the "ecliptic."

Actually, when we look at the Sun we can't see any stars in the sky; they're drowned out by scattered Sunlight. Little by little, though, we can plot the entire starry sphere of the sky, since in the course of a year all of it becomes visible at one time or another. If we note the point at zenith on midnight on any night of the year, we know that the Sun is at the directly opposite point in the sky and know its position against the stars there.

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(The Sun, along with everything else in the sky, appears to move east-to-west, making a circle in 24 hours, thanks to Earth's west-to-east rotation on its axis. This daily rotation does not concern us at the moment. If we consider the motion of the Sun *relative to the stars,* the effect of the Earth's rotation is eliminated.)

The Moon moves about the Earth in 27.32 days, relative to the stars. For this reason, the 27.32-day period is called the "sidereal month" from a Latin word for "star." As a result we see the Moon make a west-to-east circle in the sky, relative to the stars. The path followed by the Moon in the sky is also a great circle, and also divides the sky into two equal halves.

A complete circle is divided into 360 equal parts, called degrees. If the moon moves about its circle west-to-east at a constant speed (it doesn't, but it *almost* does, so let's accept the constancy for the sake of simplification), then each day it moves 360/27.32, or about 13.2 degrees eastward relative to the stars. The Sun, moving through its circle in 365.24220 days moves eastward at a rate of 360/365.24220 or 0.985 degrees per day.

Now imagine that the Moon and Sun are in the same spot in the sky, so that the Moon is directly between us and the Sun, and it is the time of the new Moon. If the Moon moves eastward, making a complete circle in the sky, and returns to that same spot (relative to the stars) in 27.32 days, is it new Moon again?

No, for in those 27.32 days, the Sun has slipped 27 degrees eastward and is no longer in that same spot. The Moon must continue in its eastward journey in order to catch up with the Sun, and it takes nearly two and a quarter days for it to do so. For this reason, the time from one new Moon to the next is, on the average 29.530588 days.

It is the new Moon that has religious significance and is of concern to ecclestiastical assemblies, or "synods." The period from one new Moon to the next is, therefore, the "synodic month."

If the Moon's circle in the sky coincided with the ecliptic; that is, if both Sun and Moon travelled exactly in the same path in the sky; there would indeed be an eclipse of the Sun at every new Moon.

There is no compelling reason, however, why the Moon would follow the precise path of the Sun, and it doesn't. The two paths, that of the Sun and that of the Moon, are great circles that do not coincide.

Two great circles in the sky that do not coincide are compelled, mathematically, to cross each other at two points, one of which is at a place in the sky directly opposite the other. These crossing points are

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called "nodes," which is from a Latin word for "knot," since a knot between two lines always comes at the point where they cross.

At the point where the great circle of the Moon's path crosses that of the Sun's path, an angle of 5.13 degrees is marked out. You can say this in more formal language thus: The Moon's orbital plane is inclined 5.13 degrees to the ecliptic.

This really isn't much. Suppose you imagined a balloon a hundred feet across and draw two great circles around it with the plane of one inclined 5.13 degrees to the other. They would meet at two points on opposite sides of the balloon, of course, and between these nodes, the two circles would separate and come together again. The two places of maximum separation would come exactly half way between the nodes, and the separation would then be 5.13 degrees.

On a balloon a hundred feet in diameter, such a separation would be 4.5 feet out of a total circumference of 314 feet. If a bacterium in the center of the balloon could see and consider those two lines, and find them to be separated by never more than 4.5 feet, it would surely feel that even though they did not coincide, they were both in the same general part of the balloon.

In the same way, though the paths of the Sun and the Moon do not coincide exactly, they are clearly in the same general part of the sky. The path followed by the Sun is divided among the twelve constellations of the Zodiac, and the path followed by the Moon is also to be found in those constellations.

Yet from the standpoint of eclipses, this inclination of the Moon's path to the ecliptic is important.

At every new Moon, the Moon passes the Sun west to east, and it is then as close to the Sun as it can get in that particular go-round of the dance of the luminaries. If the Moon passes the Sun at the point where their two paths are at their greatest separation (midway between the two nodes), there is then a gap of 5.13 degrees between the center of the Moon and the center of the Sun.

Since the apparent radius of the Sun (the distance from its center to its edge) is, on the average, 0.267 degrees, and that of the Moon is 0.259 degrees, the distance between the edge of the Sun and the edge of the Moon is 5.13 - 0.267, or 4.60 degrees. The gap between the edges of the Moon and the Sun is great enough at this time for something like nine bodies the size of the full Moon to be placed across it side by side.

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Naturally there would be no eclipse under such circumstances since the Moon is *not* exactly between us and the Sun. Indeed, if we could see the Moon at this time and somehow ignore the glare of the Sun, we would see a thin crescent on the Moon's Sunward side. We can't ever see it actually, though, since at this time, the Moon rises and sets at virtually the same time as the Sun, and we never get a chance to look at it in the Sun's absence.

Of course, if the Moon happened to be passing the Sun at a point where the two were nearer the node, the gap between them would be smaller. If the Moon passed the Sun at a point where both were exactly at either of the nodes, then, indeed, the Moon would move exactly in front of the Sun and there would be an eclipse. (This eclipse would be either total or annular according to the principles discussed in last month's article.)

The eclipse would be visible over only a portion of the Earth. The path of totality (or annularity) would be a line crossing the center of that side of the Earth's globe facing the Sun-Moon combination and would therefore be in the tropic zone. The exact latitude would depend on the time of the year; in our winter the Southern half of the tropics would get it, and in our summer the northern half would. The exact longitude would depend on the position of the Earth with respect to its rotation about its axis.

All around the line of totality, there would be a region where people could see a portion of the Sun peeping out from behind the Moon throughout the course of the eclipse. For them only a partial eclipse would be visible. Still further from the line, the vantage point would be such that the Moon would seem to miss the Sun entirely and for people in those regions of the Earth there would be no visible eclipse at all.

Let's count everything as an eclipse, however, if it is visible anywhere on Earth even partially.

The next question, then, is whether the Moon has to pass the Sun *exactly* at the node to produce an eclipse.

No, it doesn't. Suppose the Moon passes in front of the Sun a small distance from the node. In that case, the Moon passes in front of the Sun but not dead center. As viewed from that portion of the Earth's surface directly under the Sun-Moon combinations, the Moon will seem to pass the Sun a little north of center or a little south of center. The shadow will then cross the Earth a little north or a little south of its midline (as seen from the Moon). The temperate zones will then get a chance to see an eclipse, or even the polar zones.

The farther from the node it is that the Moon passes the Sun, the

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farther north, or south, the total eclipse can be seen. Eventually, if the passage takes place far enough from the node, the line of totality misses the Earth altogether, but a partial eclipse can still be seen either well to the north or well to the south. And if the passage takes place still farther from the node, even the partial eclipse can't be seen anywhere.

On the average, a total or annular eclipse of the Sun will be seen somewhere on Earth, if the Moon passes the Sun within 10.5 degrees of a node; and at least a partial eclipse will be seen somewhere on Earth, if the passage takes place within 18.5 degrees of a node.

Next, let's think about those nodes for a while. During half its circuit, the Moon is north of the ecliptic and during the other half south of the ecliptic. At one node, the Moon moves across the ecliptic at a shallow angle from north to south. This is called the "descending node," from the long-established western habit of putting north at the top of a map and south at the bottom. At the other side of the orbit, the Moon moves across the ecliptic from south to north, and that is the "ascending node."

As it happens, these nodes do not stay in the same place, relative to the stars. For a variety of gravitational reasons that we don't have to go into, they move (in step, of course) around the ecliptic, east-to-west, making one complete turn in 18.6 years.

If the nodes were to stand still relative to the stars, the Sun would make a complete circuit from ascending node back to ascending node, or from descending node back to descending node, in exactly one year. As it happens, though, the nodes move toward the approaching Sun so that the meeting takes place sooner than would be expected. The approach of the nodes cuts the time by nearly 19 days, so that the time it takes the Sun to make a complete circuit from ascending node back to ascending node, or from descending node back to descending node is 346.62 days. Let's call this the "eclipse year."

The Sun's motion across the sky, *relative to either of these nodes,* is a little faster than its motion relative to the motionless stars. Whereas the Sun moves at 360/346.62 or 1.07 degrees per day relative to the nodes. In either case it is moving eastward, of course. In the course of a synodic month, the Sun moves eastward 1.07 X 29.53 or 31.60 degrees relative to the nodes.

This means that every time the Moon reaches the new Moon position it is 31.60 degrees closer to one of the nodes than it was the time before. Eventualy it will approach the neighborhood of the node, and the question

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arises as to whether it will pass the Sun too far short of the node one time and then too far past the node the next time so that on neither occasion will there be an eclipse.

For that to happen, the Sun would have to be farther than 18.5 degrees west of the node the first time and farther than 18.5 degrees east of the node the next time. It would have to move at least 37 degrees during the time between new Moons — *and the Sun can't do that.* Relative to the nodes, the Sun can only move 31.6 degrees in the gap between new Moons. If one new Moon takes place just short of the 37 degree stretch, the next one will inevitably find the Sun within it.

This means that there has to be an eclipse; total, annular, or partial; visible from some place on Earth, *every single time the Sun is in the neighborhood of either node.* This, in turn, means that there must be *at least* two Solar eclipses every year.

Then, of course, if the Sun happens to be slightly within the eclipse region surrounding the nodes at one new Moon, it will not quite have cleared the region by the time of the next new Moon, so that there will be two Solar eclipses on Earth in successive months. That means three eclipses for that year or, if it happens at both nodes, as it may, four eclipses.

Remember that the Sun makes a complete circuit from our node back to that same node in 346.62 days, which is 19 days less than a calendar year. That means if it passes through one node very early in the year, it will have time to reach that same node before the year is out. It can then pass through two eclipses at one node, two at the other and return for another one at the first node. In this case, there can be *five* eclipses in a single year, and this is a maximum.

Under the most favorable circumstances, six successive eclipses must stretch over a period of 376 days, so there cannot be six eclipses in a year.

There it is, then. In any given year, there are anywhere from two to five eclipses of the Sun, and this sounds like quite a lot, but don't be fooled. They are invariably in different places on Earth, so you can't expect to see all of them without travelling. The chances, alas, are that in any given year you won't see any of them without travelling.

In fact, if we restrict ourselves to total eclipses, the average length of time between such phenomena for any given spot on Earth is 360 years. This means that if we take the average life expectancy to be 72 years, we can say that a particular person has only 1 chance in 5 of seeing a total eclipse in his lifetime if he doesn't travel.

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Now what about predicting eclipses?

Imagine the Moon passing the Sun just at the node. This starts a particular pattern of eclipses that can be (and is) quite complicated because the next time the Sun is at the node, the Moon isn't. Eventually, though, the Moon once again passes the Sun just at that node and the whole pattern starts all over again. If we learn the pattern for one whole cycle, we can predict the eclipses in the next cycle even without a lot of fancy astronomic sophistication.

But how long will it be between successive appearances of Sun and Moon precisely at the same node? Clearly this will come at a time when there has been an exact number of synodic months in the interval and *also* an exact number of eclipse years in the interval. In that case both Sun and Moon are back where they started.

Unfortunately the two periods, that of the synodic month and that of the eclipse year, are not easily commensurate. That is, there is no small figure that will be at once a whole number of each period within the limits of astronomic accuracy.

There are numbers, however, that are fairly small and that are *almost* correct.

Consider 19 eclipse years, for instance. That comes out to 19 X 34.62 or 6,585.78 days. Next consider 223 synodic months. That comes out to 223 X 29.53058, or 6,585.32 days.

Every 6,585+ days, then, both the Sun and the Moon have come back to the same place with respect to the nodes, so that if there was an eclipse the first time, there will be an eclipse the second time also, and then a third eclipse 6,585 days later still and then a fourth, and so on.

This 19-eclipse-year period is called the "saros," a word the Greeks borrowed (with distortion) from the Babylonians, who were probably the first to discover it.

The correspondence isn't exact, of course, since there is a 0.46 day difference. This means that at the end of the 19-eclipse-year period, the Moon has not quite caught up with the Sun. Thus each succeeding eclipse of the series takes place a little farther back with respect to the node. If it is the descending node, each succeeding eclipse of the series fall a little farther north on the Earth's surface; if it is the ascending node, a little farther south.

The whole series of eclipses that takes place for a given position of the Moon and Sun with respect to the descending node, at 6,585-day intervals, begins far in the south as a partial eclipse, progresses farther and farther

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north, becoming more nearly total until it finally becomes completely total (or annular) in the tropics; then continues still farther north gradually becoming only partial once more and fading out in the extreme north. The same happens for eclipses at the ascending node except that the progression is then southward. Altogether, 81 eclipses may be seen in a particular series over a period of about 1,460 years.

Because 223 synodic months comes to 6,585.32 days there is a complication. There is that extra third of a day which gives the Earth a chance to rotate before the eclipse takes place. Each successive eclipse in the saros series, marks its path about eight thousand miles farther west than the one before.

This means that every third eclipse in the series is back where it was, just about, on the surface of the Earth, except that it is farther north, or farther south, depending on the node.

One-third of the eclipses of the series, twenty-seven, fall in about the same longitude, and several of them will be seen from some given point as partials of varying degree. At most, only one of them will be a total eclipse as seen from some given point.

Once the saros was discovered, it was easy to take note of all the eclipses that took place at a given region of the world and realize that each forms part of a series and will more or less repeat itself every 57 eclipse years (or every 54 calendar years) for a while.

If you note that a particular series has been fading out and, at its last appearance, was only slightly partial, you'll know it won't appear again. If, on the other hand, the eclipse has been covering more of the Sun at each appearance, there is a chance that at the next appearance it may be nearly total, or even quite total.

The first person we know of by name who, in the Western tradition, predicted that an eclipse would take place in a particular year was Thales of Miletus, who was born about 640 B.C. on the Asia Minor coast. He had visited Babylonia and had probably studied the eclipse records that the astronomers there had been keeping for centuries. Noting that there had been a pretty fat partial eclipse in the year we now call 639 B.C., which had been visible in western Asia, he predicted there would be an even better one in 585 B.C.

There was. A total eclipse pushed its path through western Asia on May 28, 585 B.C., passing over a battlefield where the armies of Lydia (a land in what is now western Turkey) and Media (a land in what is now northern Iran) were getting ready to fight. The eclipse to them was a clear

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sign that the gods were angry, so they hastily patched up a treaty of peace and disbanded their armies.

Although I am a rationalist, I can't help but sigh for the simple faith of those times. Would that the nations of today would recognize the ongoing disasters of our generation as the displeasure of whatever gods there be and disband *their* armies.

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Dennis Etchison ("Calling All Monsters," June 1973) returns with a chiller about a family album full of...dreams.

The Graveyard Blues

by DENNIS ETCHISON

He sat amid tall grass, shivering in the sun, waiting for a dream to come. But it was no use. He stretched onto one side and squinted through the comber of chickweed, running his fingers over the nearest blade; it was rough when you rubbed it one way, smooth the other. Patches of grass bent to the ground where he had trampled it coming, and all of it was dovened slightly by a wind that had come and gone silently before him. The tops of the markers paved a solid granite band in the air above the grass line, and as he followed the slate-gray row with his eyes, then he saw them, the dark, misshapen figures hunched one against the other, making their way down the hillock at the far side of the cemetery.

There were two of them, and they were wrapped around in bolts of a stiff, tenebrous cloth that cast saw-toothed shadows over the untended ground. They came to the stones, and the larger one felt a way for the other, the ratchet edge of the umbra beneath her skirt jerking ahead unsteadily around heavy, unseen shoes.

He stood above the warp of the grass, staring blankly at their progress as the wind came up again and a bird, noticed now by its absence, quieted somewhere in the papery trees.

He could not take his eyes from them as they felt around the graves, tapping spasmodically, feeling, feeling. He heard the rough swishing sound of their garments; once he thought they had found it — they spread their hands in a crooked circle in the air over a headstone, only to break the circle as soon as their bodies closed to the plot — but it was not the one and they pressed restlessly on.

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When they found the site, they fell upon it, but slowly, twisted leaves settling to earth. He saw knotted hands buckle and extend like unnatural insects on the face of the granite. He saw the hands become smooth and sleek as praying mantises then, sentient hands, quick, delicate tendrils, antennae, to measure inscriptions with caliper precision, scanning with eyestalk fingers, gesturing faster, seeking to tap wrists, tug clothing, bend together in sightless discovery.

And suddenly, the memory of another Saturday: six years old and wakened by a smell, the Cream of Wheat he never liked, filtering under the door to his room, and a dream fresh as a new bruise inside his head. No one asked, of course, not yet, not Mamma or Daddy or not Vin when he crooned *Could Mars-ton come out to play today?* at the back screen. But he asked himself about it, over and over during breakfast and the tentative beginnings of play by the black walnut trees in the lot, answers that were indistinguishable from questions fading in and fading out on the dim backdrop of his inexperience like the unreadable words of advice that floated up on the underside of his Magic 8-Ball when he shook it and waited for the cloudy ink to clear. The dream: he had stolen the Radio Flyer wagon from Vin's double garage, had compounded the sin by hiding it under twiggy mulch at the edge of the graveyard where he was forbidden to play. Noon, and Vin was called home for lunch, untold. Then, scuffling over unearthed roots, a stripped bamboo stick for a sword in his jeans loop, about to be called in for soup and sandwich himself, Marston felt a need to run after Vin, tell him, apologize for the transgression. But how stupid Vin would think him, and Vin's mother and sister Nancy; they would courteously ignore him as always, reaching over his head to stack dishes or retrieve the wash from the service porch sink. How were you supposed to apologize for a dream? Mamma talked with Uncle Ralph and Uncle Harold after supper sometimes about something like that, he knew, and he heard them in the driveway, through the kitchen window, and Daddy had had to meet over the dining room table with a man he was sure Daddy had never seen before about something like that, and silly Aunt Frances still brooded with Mamma in the hall about Eddie Who Had Been In The War and when was he going to come over and make up for the way he had cursed her at Dentoni's? and Mamma had told her *Hush, it was only a dream, and* Aunt Frances had said *What do you mean, only a dream? You know*

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what's right and wrong, Mabel, and Mamma had said *You know better than that, Fran,* in that righteous way of hers, *you know it doesn't work both ways, it never has,* and Marston had known that that had something to do with it, too. So that when Mamma finally called for him out the back door, and he did not answer because he couldn't yet, because he had not told Vin, which he couldn't do, he ran — not to the back door and not across the street to Vin's but away from both, lighting out across town in what turned out to be the direction of the Plunge; and then the rest of it. And he felt something close to that now, here at the edge of the graveyard: he wanted to leave, to go back, something was not right and what he saw upset him, and yet he could not go, not yet, fascinated as he was by the sight of the two mysterious figures hugging a tombstone, something he had not seen or ever dreamed of before.

And so he ran away from both choices, not toward home and not across the cemetery. He headed off across town in a direction he did not want to have to think about.

"Ol' Marston's got the graveyard blues again," said Joseph when they came into the kitchen.

"Marston," said Mamma.

She did not glance up from the fryers on the drainboard but continued to lay out the cut-up pieces, gazing at them as if they were somehow objects of pity. The smell of burnt pinfeathers lingered.

"Here, now, you gave your..." *mamma such a scare,* Grandma almost said, but he was no longer a child, though she still spoke of his "going out to play" when he left the house to go into the arbor or to tend the bantams, to sit next to the coops. "You are hungry?" asked Grandma.

"What a question, Karen," said Joseph.

"I...hope you're not planning to go out tonight," said Mamma, not turning.

"Your mamma wants to talk to you," said Grandma. "Here, a piece of French twist with butter. Go and sit now."

"Oh, Mamma," said his mother.

"Mabel, Mabel," said Joseph in his loud voice, which always seemed out of place in the breakfast nook, "don't hover over the boy, will you? For God's sake. Right, Marty?"

"I'm not going anyplace," offered Marston.

Later, after supper, dishes more or less done and drying on the white tiles and Marston tipped back against the wall in his chair, his ear next to the radio on the telephone stand, Mamma hung up her apron and left the kitchen. That surprised him. He leaned forward to the table

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and listened to her footsteps leaving the kitchen linoleum, onto the carpet in the hall, the floor heater grille screaking when she walked on it, the voices from the dining room louder, then muffled again as the door swung shut after her, pulling a thin cloud of cigar smoke in around him.

He did not hear her coming back down the hall, only the sudden flurry of low conversation as the door swung open again.

Mamma, wielding a heavy, oversized book, squeezed into a chair on the other side of the table. She posited the book on the tablecloth. It looked to be an old heirloom. She smoothed her hands, reddened from the sink, over the padded cover, at the same time studying her son's face until he could no longer avoid looking back.

"How much longer is it till your birthday? Marston, can you tell me?"

"Oh, you know, Mamma."

"I want you to tell me," she said.

He could not read her expression. At least she was not angry, in that way that made him ashamed. "I'm gonna be sixteen day after tomorrow. Monday," he said, a little proudly, and felt a little embarrassed about it. To change the subject he tried, "Is that Grandma's Bible?"

Her eyes focused through him. "Something like that," she answered. "And I'm not being sacrilegious." She considered opening the book. "Sixteen years old. Already," she said softly, and he realized the subject had not changed after all.

He sat straight, feeling tall, and tried to talk to her in a matter-of-fact way. "What book is it?" he asked, pushing grains of salt into the white tablecloth. "Mamma?" he added, and then realized that his voice had cracked, and that it was no use.

He folded his hands and waited.

She was ready to say something, he knew, but was trying to put it off, at the same time trying not to back away from it. She propped her elbow on the table edge and held her chin in her hand with controlled casualness, lifting the heavy cover with her other hand.

"It's such a shame you never knew your grandfather." Then she said, "He would have been able to talk to you."

The book fell open. Marston caught a glimpse of pressed letters written in broad, faded fountain-pen script.

"This was his Book, the first one. He carried it with him all through the War. The others, the family Books, we started after he came home."

Marston tilted his head sideways to show interest.

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"He was in the infantry. He and Mamma came over from the old country in nineteen, oh, nineteen eleven, yes, see here? And he joined the service, of course, when war broke out. He was a very striking man...my dad."

When she said "my dad" her lip began to move, but she held it tight with her hand. Marston fidgeted, reached out tenuously and raised other pages. "May I see?" he volunteered.

The pages he lifted were filled with handwriting, and now he felt an unease because it was not what he had thought; it was not a Bible and it was not a scrapbook.

To speak, to say something to get her past tears, because he would not be able to do or say anything once she started but would have to wait quietly, eyes averted, he said, "Is it your — is it Grandfather's diary?"

"It was his Book," she said in a forced singsong, "his Dream Book. But I supposed you know about the Dream Books, don't you?" and it sounded almost like a gentle accusation. At last he made the connection. He had seen the others, quickly, once at their bedroom door: Daddy had been putting the large black volume in on top of the stack in the cedar chest, had turned his head, said *Yes, Marty? Can I help you?* with a false calmness, something he never said at home, and then had turned back to twist the key in the Yale padlock, missing it the first time.

"Your grandfather was...a very *special* man. You've heard me talk about him before, but I only wish you had known him."

Shifting to another level, her voice picked up. Marston had the feeling she was not talking to him, not quite. "He..." and here she shut her eyes so, as if seeing a scene she had rehearsed many times over the years thrust now suddenly before her, no putting it off this time, "...he recorded every dream he had, starting over there, and then, back home, here, and for a while Mamma shared it with him, but then he gave her her own Book...And Ralph, Uncle Ralph and Uncle Harold, and I had one, too, we all did, with my name on it. When Aunt Frances and Aunt Marcella joined our family, and Bill, Daddy, then they were given..."

She was getting at something— why wouldn't she say it? He blinked, faster, then kept his eyes closed a second, two seconds; her outline, the hair, the reading glasses flashed in relief on his eyelids. He knew she wanted something from him, and he had been trying to give it, he always did for her when she asked and when she didn't, if he could guess, but now he was not sure. He smelled

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night-blooming jasmine through the window screen, masking the wind from the slough, and cigar smoke.

"What about the dreams, Mamma?" He felt a burning in his eyes, and he said, "What do you want me to do? I mean," and here he made a jump, hoping he was not going too far, "I know you want me to tell you about what I dream at night — but what for? Mamma, what for?" Then, retreating slightly, seeing her eyes again, the glasses coming off, the fingers rubbing: "Is it a game I have to learn, is that it?" Foolish, that was a foolish thing to say.

"It's no game, Marty."

Joseph, standing there how long? The cigar smoke. Marston looked up. Joseph was not smoking, he was not allowed to smoke in the kitchen, but it was in his clothes.

Her eyes held on Marston. "We're having a talk, Joseph."

"I say you ought to out and tell him, if you're going to. One way or the other, Mabel. You've got the boy so he doesn't know whether he's coming or going."

"We," and she backed off a bit, he could hear it, "we were having a talk, Marston and I. About...about the way he's been spending his afternoons."

Joseph tucked his shirt in over his belly. His fly was unzipped a third of the way, as always.

"What's she trying to tell you, son? That it's picture albums and good old stories? That's not what it's about. You read it careful. Trenches and blood. That's right. And your grandfather Stolberg watching a man die that didn't have to, his best buddy it was, now get that. You see? It didn't have to happen, wouldn't've if he'd been able to understand the dreams back then."

Mamma cleared her throat.

Joseph's big hand clasped him firmly at the back of the neck, as though to hold him from running.

I'm not trying to run away, he thought. Was he? He kept looking at his mother. No, it wasn't true; he only went there to get away, to think, to know what to say, to come up with something Mamma, something all of them would want to hear.

"Now, Joseph," she said.

"You like being part of this family, don't you, Marty?" asked Joseph.

Marston, his face burning, lowered his head.

"Well everybody pulls his load here," Joseph began lecturing. "Your daddy —"

"Uncle, I'm trying..."

"— And your granddaddy, they pulled their fair share — more. Nils, he taught us all. So there'd never be any more hurt. And there hasn't been, let me —"

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"Uncle!"

Her voice struck the close walls, the tiles. Out on the other side of the sill a cricket stopped in midchirp; even the talk in the dining room seemed to pause.

She pushed up out of her chair. Then, her hands locked at her waist, she said, "Whatever I'm trying to explain to Marston...whatever...I'll do it in my own time, and in my own way. What is best for my boy. If you please!"

Joseph stopped himself, mumbled, shook his head, ran a glass of water, touched it to his mouth, poured it down the drain and walked loudly back to the other room

She sat down, shaking.

The sounds of the evening returned slowly, and after time passed she said gently, "Why don't you...you can go to your room now, honey. Or you can look at television. I don't think anyone else is in the living room yet." She had one hand curved over her eyes. "But what am I saying? You're not a baby any more."

She glanced up, her eyes red. He wanted to stop playing with the salt shaker and touch her arm or her hand but could not.

He said, "I guess I'd like to hear about — about Granddad."

She studied him tiredly.

"There's nothing for you to worry about, Marston. I've never fibbed to you, have I?" She tried to smile. "I want you to stop worrying about it."

"Yes, Mamma."

She took a breath and her eyelids fluttered. "I don't want you to worry about anything. Honey, all you have to do for now is this...I want you to start keeping a Dream Book of your own. Use your school notebook if you like until I can get you a good one. That's all. It's just something everyone in this house does. I was waiting for your father to speak to you, but he's, well, Daddy's not very good at talking to you, you know that. It was really always my duty, though, because it started with my dad."

She waited, watching him. "Look, I know. You can use the tape recorder I promised you for your birthday, if you like, for the time being. You may as well have it now. If it makes it easier."

"But," he began uncertainly, "but when you told me to start remembering my dreams, remember? I asked you if — if the others would have to hear, too. And you didn't answer. You didn't. Why not? Will they?"

"Well, we don't all sit around and talk about each other's dreams. It's not like that. You see, honey, I wanted you to tell just me at first, so you could get used to it. You have to get the hang, and it takes patience, I know. You have to

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learn how to wake up gradually, so you keep a thread of it to hold onto, and then you follow the thread back in, this is the way I like to think of it, back in, so you don't lose the whole thing. You have to keep the gist of it, that's what counts."

Marston turned in his chair.

"But I didn't answer your question, did I? You know what else? I think it would be all right if, well, if you just let me listen to your tape recorder in the mornings, after you're through, and then I could, I could explain to the others, tell them what it was about. That way they wouldn't have to listen, or even read it, if you didn't want them to. At least not at first. I'll ask Grandma, but I think it will be all right. How does that sound?

"Because, don't you see, they all, we all have to know something about it. And then, oh, we can talk it over, have a kind of meeting. You know those times when everyone goes into the other room after breakfast, while you're out to pl — outside? Well, that's when we have our meetings. That's the way it's always been. We single out any messages that we think we ought to act on as a family, and then your Uncle Ralph or Uncle Harold, whoever's sitting at the head that week, they decide what would be the right thing to do. This week it's your Uncle Harold."

The after-dinner talk in the dining room grew louder again. He could imagine them talking about his dreams, what they would say if they really knew: how they would laugh, the way the men guffawed and the women made their shocked sounds when Joseph told one of his stories about the time he was a salesman. He knew, and imagining made him feel knotted inside, the way he felt on the last Sunday night of summer vacation when he knew he would have to start school again in the morning.

"Marston."

When she said his name like that, he knew there was something more, and that it was something he would as soon not have to hear.

"I really did want to talk to you about that other, too."

"About what?" he asked warily.

"It *is* a point I think we ought to clear up, don't you? You know, it really isn't very nice the way Uncle Joseph has to go out looking for you in his car like that after school."

"I do all my chores in the morning."

"I know, honey, but why do you want to go out to that place? It is consecrated ground, after all, and private property..."

"There's no sign."

"Yes, but I'm sure they don't want strangers just wandering around in there. It isn't something that decent people do."

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"I don't go there very much."

"Marston..."

"Well, not every day. Nobody says I go there every day."

"But why go at all? You have such a good mind, and there are so many interesting things you could be doing, instead of..."

"I just go there sometimes to be alone."

"But you can be alone right here. You have your own room."

A soreness started in his throat.

"Do you go there to meet someone, is that it? Some friends you don't want to bring home? You know, if they're decent young people..."

"I never see anybody. Except for —"

Just then chairs creaked, and the men stook up on the thin rug in the dining room. Loud voices, and then the men came out, thumping the swinging door and followed each other through the kitchen to the service porch and out the screen door to the backyard.

Marston didn't look up.

"Who are they, Marston?" she asked after the men had passed through.

"That's just Daddy," he tried lamely, wishing it hadn't come up, "and Uncle —"

"You know what I'm talking about, young man."

He gave up. "I don't know!" he said too loudly. "I don't know who they are. Just some people. I didn't talk to them — I don't talk to anybody. They were just two people, they were wearing all black and they walked funny. Like they couldn't see, or something."

She let out a breath that sounded like it would never end.

"So you have seen them. I was afraid of that. Grandma was right. She said you would, sooner or later."

"Well, so what? Who are they?"

"You must have seen Rosie," said Mamma, her lip beginning to tremble violently as she stared into a spot both on the table and beyond it, "and Cousin Erna. I knew they'd be going again. That's why I didn't want you going over there. There was no reason for you to know about them yet. Our dad is buried there. Your grandfather Stolberg."

She began to cry openly.

"My sister Rosie, and Erna. They left the family...the family ways a long, long time ago, before you were born. I tried to warn Rosie, but she wouldn't listen. She just wouldn't believe. And look what happened to them! I didn't want you to know yet. I didn't want you to be frightened, but now you know, now you've seen for yourself that it isn't a game..."

She went on, and there was nothing for him to do but wait, and he couldn't bear that. So, as

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quickly as he could, he maneuvered out of the chair, took a step, and bolted.

Slipping out the screen door, letting it drift shut without a sound, he forced himself to move slowly, hearing the sounds and stories from the arbor, from the grapevines and the milky fig trees, and he crossed the driveway cracked with crab grass, followed the driveway out into the blue street, past the black walnuts to the house where Vin had lived before he moved away; he let himself out the gate at the back of Vin's lot and began walking fast, then running over other lots, heading across town. Moving in the twilight, he remembered that first time he had run off: not home and not to Vin's but somewhere, anywhere, to be alone, to think. And the way Mamma had wept and clutched him to her cold cheeks late that night when finally he had been found. It was the only moment he still remembered about that night, but it was enough. He wished — he wished —

Now, of course, he was too old. But he couldn't help wanting — he didn't know what he wanted. There was only one thing he could hold to now: to get away, far away, to some place like the old overgrown grove by the church grounds, the place where he had gone so many times lately to think up a dream that would sound right, that would be what they wanted, that would not be laughed at. He would lie there in the copse, among the creepers and broom and moss, waiting, waiting perhaps without even knowing it for these strange revenants to return. And there, while he waited, he could think hard about who they were and why they were as they were now and not like the family, about why they had left and what secrets they might know about living apart, and the price, about how steep, how terribly steep it truly was.

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Some suspenseful deep-space sf from Mr. Green, whose stories about "Conscience" Allan Odegaard ("The Shamblers of Misery," August 1969, "The Butterflies of Beauty," June 1971) have recently been collected in a book titled CONSCIENCE INTERPLANETARY (Doubleday).

A Star Is Born

by JOSEPH GREEN

The slip-ship *Sagan* slowed below that magical point in the tau region where real space became visible again. A million bright fireflys leaped into being on the locator telescope, always a beautiful sight after the gray dreariness of nonspace.

Christiaan Hodges had no time for star-gazing. During almost a year in space he had become a competent astronomer's helper and had gradually assumed certain regular duties. His present job was to use the small scope to focus the larger one in the nose of the dumbbell-shaped vessel. Dr. Bernard Herrick was waiting impatiently at the master console for today's first look at Baby.

To Chris' disgust, the *Sagan* was off-center more than the astronomy module could swivel. He had to call the bridge and ask for a ship's attitude correction.

"I am aware of the position of my ship, Mr. Hodges," the cold, formally correct voice of Captain Jackson responded. "We have a minor problem in the servo for the left forward attitude thruster. Kindly ask Dr. Herrick to contain himself until it is corrected."

Chris sighed and relayed the message. Their experienced captain had little respect for astronomers and none at all for poets, as he had once openly told Chris. In a calm, measured voice the gray-haired spacer had informed the expedition historian that he was a useless luxury, imposed on them over the captain's strenuous objections. Fortunately for Chris, the captain had been overruled by the universities sponsoring this trip.

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Chris had kept the peace by clamping his teeth together and walking away. It had been the wrong tactic. Since then, he had sensed contempt lurking behind the captain's icy formality.

"One would think that after a year's practice they could hold the ship steady through the slip phase," Bernie Herrick grumbled. Fortunately, he had not keyed in his intercom speaker. The pudgy astronomer was already an unpopular figure with the entire flight crew.

The *Sagan* started turning on its short axis. After a moment it stopped, and Chris moved his big hands to the controls. It was the work of a minute to focus the astronomy module, then touch the "open" button on his alignment console. The clamshell doors protecting the 40-inch reflector and its associated sensors — an infrared telescope, ultraviolet spectrometer, and x-ray spectrograph — split apart. The flaming red disk of Baby filled the three-foot-square viewscreen.

They were less than a light-year away from this huge spherical mass of hydrogen and spacedust officially known as Protostar 96 in Nebula HO 33876. On their next slip out of nonspace they would be near enough to enter orbit around it. And if the calculations of Bernie Herrick and his associates were correct, one day within their planned five-month stay the gigantic gravitational pressures in the center would cause nuclear fusion to begin. The chain reaction would spread throughout the core in minutes, causing an appreciable change in luminosity. Mankind would witness close-up what had never before been seen, the actual birth of a star.

Bernie was feeding the first data he had obtained into the ship's computer. He sat back and waited, and after a moment one of his console displays lit up with the completed calculations. The short balding scientist turned to Chris, beaming. "Right on target! I don't know how you'll say this in verse, but we are within the center of our parameters."

Chris ignored the friendly jibe. He was gazing at the red beauty of Baby, absorbed. The human eye could not perceive a thousandth of the information the instruments were gathering, but the protostar's sheer grandeur was overwhelming. More than twice the size of Sol, it had a diameter of 1,800,000 miles. Baby would become a star with a life expectancy of only two billion years, a fifth that of Man's sun. Large stars lived out their lives faster than small ones.

Bernie fed the day's program into the console, then sat back to let the automatic controls adjust the

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instruments. The door to the cramped compartment opened, and Tom Rowly, one of the three other astronomers, entered. Tom was a lean, wiry, gray-haired man of uncertain age. He nodded to Chris, then eased himself into the second chair by Bernie.

"A final slip, and perhaps one day more to achieve a circular orbit," the chief scientist said with satisfaction. "Then we will begin our three-shift operations, and perhaps there will be enough console duty to satisfy everyone."

Tom gave a dry chuckle, and Chris joined in. The *Sagan* spent 23 out of every 24 hours moving through the gray nothingness of nonspace. Once each day the Brannon generators were reversed, slowing the ship until it made the transition back to the real universe. But several minutes were required for the hydrogen rockets to decelerate the *Sagan* well below the speed of light, to the point where the instruments could allow for the Doppler affect caused by their own velocity. More were needed to accelerate again, until they entered the high tau region just below light speed itself. Once in tau the Brannon generators were turned on, throwing them into nonspace. The ship's forward movement was increased by a factor of fifty thousand while in the gray void. And during that period, all external observation instruments were useless.

Christiaan Hodges was officially listed as Ship Historian, but in actuality he was a poet. As a child he had been fascinated by the stars, had spent hours staring raptly at the constellations, had built his own small reflector. The Brannon effect was discovered when he was a teen-ager, making the stars actually available to Man. Interstellar travel became common-place while he was still in preparatory. And it was there that Chris learned he was not a good mathematician and hated the subject. The fact that an astronomer spent most of his time bent over a computer keyboard, not a telescope eyepiece, had been one of the most disheartening discoveries of his life. He had switched to literature before college.

As a young poet of 31, Chris had achieved a growing reputation in a specialized field, the popularization of scientific discoveries. A century ago Nobel laureate John Steinbeck had accompanied the *Glomar Challenger* on an early oceanic deep-drilling expedition. He managed to convey the excitement and fascination of basic science to millions of readers. The scientific community realized it had been neglecting an excellent means of drumming up public support and increasing its appropriations for basic research. It became

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common practice for scientific expeditions which could not be reported "live," as were the first moon missions, to have an accomplished writer in the crew. And during the last few years, as the condensed and sensual speech of poetry became more popular than prose, the writers were replaced by poets.

"I rechecked the projection from the final baseline measurements, Bernie," said Tom Rowly, his eyes on the figures flickering across the master console's several small screens. "It still looks good."

"Everything is going so well it's almost frightening," admitted the chief scientist. "I've lived in dread that we'd reach this point and discover the theoretical model and the base line disagreed just enough to throw us off a few hundred years."

Chris knew enough astronomy to understand the two men. Baby was almost half the galaxy's length from Earth, in the Sagittarius arm. They had by-passed the galactic center to reach it. The faint radiation from the contracting red giant that reached the 120-inch telescope on the back of the moon was 48,000 years old. As they moved toward the protostar, slowing into normal space each day for new recordings, the light became progressively younger. Today's readings were less than a year old in objective time. In effect they had a history of Baby's radiation for the past 48,000 years.

This was the first time Chris had worked with astronomers for a protracted period. Normally he would meet with someone who had made an important discovery, absorb the essence of it, and prepare his poetic report. Like any other science reporter, he usually avoided the uninteresting routine details that led to the final conclusion — which was often provocative and fascinating.

The poet had quickly discovered that these men loved their work with a fierce passion. Tom Rowly had once dragged himself out of a sickbed to perform his hour of console operation each fourth day. And constant rechecking of prior calculations seemed routine, not the exception. Chris could not imagine how anyone forced himself to run through the same laborious set of figures a second or third time.

The warning buzzer sounded. Bernie gave an impatient sigh, but gestured for Chris to close the protective doors. When the "locked" indicator light came on, all three men hurried to the safety couches in their individual tiny cubicles. The *Sagan's* artificial gravity field — a side benefit provided by the Brannon generators — adjusted automatically to allow for acceleration effects, but

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the slips into and out of real space were sometimes rough. And within the field, a moving body and a bulkhead had the same impact on each other as before.

The astronomy crew had been told to remain in their couches throughout this period in nonspace, since it would be for only a few minutes objective time. The actual slip was so easy Chris recognized it only by the peculiar wrenching effect it always had on his stomach. And he had time to reread only a few stanzas of Loskov's *The Aging Universe,* the first major poetic appreciation of basic science, before the wrench came again. Chris unstrapped himself and hurried to the observation room below the telescope, for his first visual look at Baby.

And found pandemonium there.

Bernie was already present, locked in a vehement argument with Captain Jackson. The other off-duty astronomers were competing for window space with unoccupied members of the flight crew. And none of them were staring at Baby.

The *Sagan* had emerged into real space precisely on target, 22 million miles from the protostar and 8 million to the right side. They were decelerating toward orbital speed. The area directly behind the young giant was visible for the first time. It contained a spectacular sight — a very close new star.

"I tell you our original program is unsafe!" Captain Jackson was protesting to Bernie. The *Sagan's* acerbic commander was a tall, lean, hatchet-faced veteran of several interstellar voyages. "You know no better than your poet-helper what will happen when two such massive bodies approach each other. I will not have my ship caught between them!"

"Captain, that young star is still a long ways off. We have at least a year, perhaps more, before it will near Roche's limit and one or the other be pulled apart by tidal forces. I'll give you more precise figures shortly. In the meantime I see no reason why we shouldn't proceed as planned, except that of course we'll want to focus a few hours each day on the newcomer."

When he saw that their captain remained unconvinced, Bernie took a deep breath and went on. "Man, don't you realize what we've got here? This is an unexpected bonus, a tremendous bit of luck! We knew protostars tended to develop in clusters, but to find one this close to Baby, and only a fraction of galactic time older...why, we'll get information on early development Baby couldn't give us for thousands of years!"

"But that huge mass is heading this way rapidly, and if your estimates are the least bit off —" Captain Jackson was not appeased.

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"I can't predict the precise time one will start losing gas streamers to the other. That would be our first danger. But I see no cause to worry. We will have ample warning, and you can always accelerate us out of here. I *would* recommend you keep the rockets always ready to fire, just in case."

"You don't need to suggest elementary precautions to me, Doctor! What I worry about is the unknown. I've had a little astronomy in my day. You don't know any better than I what new forces may be unleashed, what the gravitational effects will be."

"No, but the difference between us, sir, is that I wish to find out!" Bernie's voice was growing angry. He straightened rounded shoulders and drew his short form erect. Dr. Bernard Herrick was one of the world's foremost astronomers and had a solid and very real dignity he could draw upon when he wished. "Now I cannot command, Captain, but I warn you fairly — I will file a highly unsatisfactory report on your cooperation when we return, unless you enter orbit as planned."

"Make your final calculations and get back with me!" growled the captain, turning angrily away and stalking off to the spiral stairs leading up two levels to the bridge.

As usual, Bernie had not been very tactful but had gotten his way. Chris had never understood why the irascible captain disliked the expedition poet, but it was obvious why he argued with the chief scientist. Both were strong-willed men, and their ideas on how to manage the single ship they shared were often at odds.

Chris got along well with all four scientists, and all of the seven-man flight crew except the captain. Pete Schroder, second officer and engineer, had become a close personal friend.

Bernie noticed his voluntary assistant for the first time. "Oh, Chris! Let's get on up to the nose and see how Tom is doing. This is a most exciting development; we have to take every advantage of it."

The scientist hurried to the stairs in the corridor. "How did all of you get into action so fast?" Chris asked, as they made their way to the center floor.

"Oh, well...the first slip was so smooth Tom and I figured the one back would be equally easy. He waited for it in the console chair, and the rest of us took it in the observation room seats."

"Darn it, Bernie, you could have called me!"

The astronomer looked mildly startled. "Well, yes, I could have! Sorry, Chris, too much on my mind; apologies."

In the slightly protruding nose pod they found Tom Rowly hard at work. He had reserved a whole

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computer bank for the expected new data and was sampling and displaying the current readings on the small console screens. The new young star filled the larger screen on the wall.

Tom barely looked up when they entered but said aloud, "Looks good, Bernie. As a preliminary, I'd say less than five thousand years ago for the initiation of fusion. I give it about eight months objective time before gas streamers start flowing back and forth; maybe thirteen to the actual breakup of one or the other."

"We'll spend the next fifty years wondering what turned angular momentum into linear acceleration, if we don't find out now," Bernie replied, settling into the second chair. "Was it already in motion toward Baby, or was that an effect of some violent element in the birth process? And where did it get its high speed? To start with, we need some quick size estimates on the energy exchanges between that star and its accompanying gas clouds, their present spin rates, and the degree of solidification. Also..."

The conversation became too complex for Chris to follow. He knew in general that they were discussing the steps by which a spinning gas cloud separated into the central body that became a sun and the smaller ones that condensed into rotating planets.

The excitement gradually died away as the astronomers settled down to work. Within a few days they were using data on the young star, which with their usual irreverence they had named "Child," to make new calculations on stellar aging. Captain Jackson and the six crewmen did their usual jobs with efficiency and dispatch. The new routine became almost as dull as the old, at least for Chris.

One day Chris caught Pete Schroder alone in the small lounge and learned that Captain Jackson had once wanted to be an astronomer. Part of his apparent disdain for the scientists was simple envy. Pete had no explanation for why the expedition poet ranked even lower in the captain's eyes.

After a month the four astronomers were asking Chris to fill in for them on the master console during routine runs. And Chris' notebook was steadily filling with fragments and bits-of-business as the epic he would write on the way home took shape in his mind.

Three months after they entered orbit, Chris was at the master console alone when Baby became a true star.

The radiation spectrum emitted by a gaseous body obtaining its heat from gravitational pressure was different from that given off by a nuclear furnace. A special detection program in the console was

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set to recognize the change. It did its job faithfully, and a large green bulb suddenly burned for the first time. Chris breathed a silent word of thanksgiving — they were two weeks past the actual projected optimum day — and put in a hasty call to Bernie. And then he sat back and watched the face of Baby change.

In the large viewscreen Chris saw the sullen red sphere perceptibly whiten, slowly turning to a much lighter shade. The chain reaction of fusing hydrogen atoms spread swiftly, propagating through the areas of highest pressure almost at the speed of light itself. The formerly smooth surface broke into whorls and spots as columns of superheated gas rose from the interior, cooled, and fell back. All this was being recorded — but Chris alone was actually witnessing the birth of a star.

But then the chief scientist was behind the historian, gesturing for him to take the second chair. Bernie was in such a hurry he did not even strap himself in, a violation of the safety rules. Chris pulled his seat belts tight and watched, absorbed. A man he respected was seeing a dream come true before his eyes.

Tom Rowly and a third astronomer were waiting in the narrow corridor by the spiral stairs. This was what had lured them into a 30-month voyage across space, the furtherest men had yet traveled in the galaxy. It was a moment of breathless tension, an experience they would never forget.

Chris had switched his attention from the screen to the men watching it. This tension, this fulfillment, would play as much part in his poem as the birth itself.

"Fantastic!" Bernie muttered; he was speaking to himself. And as he reached to adjust a control, a giant hand seemed to seize the *Sagan*. It gripped and held the huge vessel for several seconds, shaking it violently back and forth, like a child carelessly playing with a gargantuan rattle.

Bernie was hurled forward against the console and crumpled across its tilted face in a plump heap. Tom Rowly was propelled into the room and slammed flat against the wall opposite the door; he fell to the floor. The second astronomer in the corridor hit the doorframe and bounced back. There was a loud groaning of strained metal, and the crashing sounds of both bodies and loose objects rebounding off walls and equipment. These were followed by the surprised yells of frightened and injured men. The lights dimmed but brightened again almost immediately when the emergency power came on.

Chris was subjected to the same

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forces as the rest, but his chair straps held him firmly in place. When it seemed to be over, he released himself. The man in the corridor was groaning; Bernie and Tom were unconscious.

Chris pulled Bernie back into his chair and fastened the pudgy man in. He checked the pulse and found it steady. A severe bruise on the forehead indicated the chief astronomer had only been knocked out. Tom moaned and a moment later tried to sit up.

Chris examined the third man in the corridor. He had a broken arm and a badly twisted ankle, but was conscious. Chris urged him to lie still until help came and hurried back to Bernie. The older man was beginning to stir. He opened his eyes as Chris reached him, winced in pain, and gingerly touched his forehead. The first thing the astronomer saw when his eyes focused was the large viewscreen — and Bernie lifted a trembling finger and pointed. Chris followed his gaze and gasped aloud.

The surface of Baby had erupted in a gigantic tongue of flame, a huge torch of fire visibly rising off the surface. A mass of hot gas had been ripped free by some cataclysmic force and was flying into space with terrifying speed. Chris realized immediately this was no prominence, no simple eruption which would fall back again. A tremendous streamer had somehow been accelerated to escape velocity, far sooner than the astronomers had thought possible.

And it was hurtling directly toward the *Sagan.*

Bernie had recovered enough to operate the console. He took the 40-inch reflector off automatic and focused it on the flying cloud, trying with an experienced eye to judge its speed. The large bruise on his forehead was visibly swelling, but not bleeding. As Tom Rowly dragged himself upright, Bernie said, "I estimate better than four thousand miles a second, Tom. That gives us about 30 minutes, which should be ample. I'll notify Captain Jackson. Will you take a few readings and get the exact figures from the computer?"

"If I live," said Tom, groaning in pain as he eased himself into the chair his chief was vacating.

"What was that force that shook the ship?" asked Chris. The astronomers did not even seem curious.

"Almost certainly a gravity wave," Bernie replied, holding on to the console while he tested shaky legs. "Turn the locator scope on Child."

Chris moved to his inactive console and obeyed. What he saw was so spectacular it defied description. Child was visibly flying apart. Huge streamers and whorls

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of gas were escaping into space in every direction. The central body was tearing itself into several sections. The bulk of the fragmenting fiery body still seemed to be heading toward Baby.

Bernie took a hasty look and nodded. "Tom, we have to revise our figures on the stability of a star in the tidal field of a larger body. Perhaps a new star does not have the same cohesive strength as an older one, and that threw us off. The gravity wave was from that first major expansion, Chris. When a body as massive as a star flys apart, its original gravitic force is propagated through space in the same manner and speed as light. After it passed us and hit Baby, the wave caused that eruption you see. The breakup of Child probably means Baby will survive and absorb a lot of the smaller star."

"*We* won't survive if we don't get out of here," Tom reminded them.

Bernie turned toward the corridor. Chris saw that the older man was still unsteady on his feet and hastily said, "I'll go with you." He grasped one heavy arm and helped support Bernie up the spiral stairs to the bridge floor.

There were only three men on duty, Captain Jackson, Pete Schroder, and the navigator. All were injured in some fashion. The most seriously hurt people had been sent to sick bay. Simmons, a crewman who doubled as paramedic, was busy setting broken bones. He had multiple bruises and several cracked ribs himself.

"I don't have a 40-incher at my disposal, Doctor, but we do have scopes," the captain responded, after hearing the news. "We know about the eruption and will be getting out of here just as soon as systems checks are complete." He was cradling his right hand; the wrist had been broken when he fended himself off a bulkhead.

Chris had to admire their coldly distant captain. The veteran spaceman wasted neither breath nor time reminding the chief astronomer he had warned him something like this might happen.

Bernie flicked on an intercom and called Tom, to learn that the streamer's speed had been measured and they had 31 more minutes until collision. He had barely relayed the message when the deep voice of Pete Schroder called, "Captain! I'm not getting a response from the damper controls. We have a problem in the last relay circuit."

There was a brief moment of silence. Captain Jackson seemed to turn a shade more gray, as though aging before their eyes. He finally said, "Switch to the backup circuit and try it."

"Already did," Pete said, his

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voice low. "The whole module is out. I think it's that Darvin C-6; we've had trouble with it before."

Captain Jackson held his broken wrist and looked down at the second officer. Pete's left leg was extended to the side, held carefully straight. His kneecap was broken, and any movement at all was extremely painful. The captain's voice was as cold and calm as ever when he said, "None of my crew are physically capable of an outside replacement run, Doctor. What about your people?"

The fourth astronomer turned out to be hurt worse than the three they knew about. He was in the sick bay with both wrists broken. The only uninjured man on board was the historian, Christiaan Hodges.

Captain Jackson gave Chris a long, calculating look. Finally he said, "Mr. Hodges, I find it a bitter quirk of fate that the least able man on board should also be the only one spared injury. Are you willing to make a try at replacing that bad module?"

Chris nodded.

"Then we have no choice but to send you outside," the captain said — and abruptly had to sit down. His face was pale and strained.

Captain Jackson was suffering from shock. Even those men whose bones were not broken were suffering from that inevitable follower of all serious physical trauma.

A spacesuit was brought onto the bridge, and Pete Schroder briefed Chris as Bernie and the navigator helped him into it. After giving the basic instructions Pete added, "The trick is to shove the module firmly onto the contacts in the back of the receptacle, but without being so violent you bend the plugs. It *must* go all the way down, or the Saf-Loks won't close around the face. I'll keep in constant touch by radio."

The navigator slipped the helmet over Chris' head and twisted to lock it in place. By his ear Pete's voice, now tinny instead of deep, moved smoothly into walking instructions, then paused. Chris nodded, then realized that was not the best way to communicate, and tongued in his mike. "I think I can handle the magshoes, Pete; they were in my training program."

Captain Jackson was checking the exterior of Chris' spacesuit. When he was satisfied, he slipped the new module in a carrying pouch attached to the waist and sealed the flap. Chris was hustled to the airlock. When the inner door closed, Pete's voice said, "Hold tight to the restraint bars; we're going to use the emergency decompress procedure."

Chris grasped the waist-high steel bars, braced his feet, and waited. After a final "Ready?" Pete opened the outer door, without pumping out the air.

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For a few seconds the whirling stream of escaping gas tore violently at Chris' hands, but then it was gone into space. He had no difficulty holding on. Unlike the astronomers, all of whom despised exercise, he had kept himself in excellent physical condition.

Chris pulled himself along the guide rod to the door and out onto the hull. The artificial gravity field had been turned off, to permit him to walk upright with the magshoes. As his weightless feet locked to the steel plating, he lifted his gaze, looking back along the 200 feet of narrow central body to the second dumbbell containing the mighty hydrogen fusion engines. He saw the small hump that housed the engine control modules — and beyond the ship he saw Child.

At less than nine million miles away the disintegrating star was an unbelievably huge mass of flaming gas, filling half the heavens. Streamers were flaring and billowing outward from its original center in titanic waves, so gigantic that they seemed capable of burning up the galaxy. Chris paused in spite of the urgency of his mission, lost in awe.

And the pragmatic voice of Pete Schroder said, "As you approach the hump, Chris, notice the panel fasteners at the two lower corners. Turn them..." and Chris tore his gaze away from a beauty so compelling that the soul could not endure it. He hurriedly clumped his way down the hull, as fast as he could free one foot after setting down the other.

At the hump, it took Chris only a few seconds to undo the bottom fasteners and swing the weightless cover up and back; it remained where he left it suspended. Eight removable modules were visible. The Darvin C-6 was third from the bottom, and he managed to move the Saf-Lok fasteners to the side and grasp the small metal pulling bar across its front.

Chris tugged on the bar, gently at first and then harder. The module did not move. He rechecked the Saf-Loks, then braced himself and pulled hard. The C-6 suddenly shot out of the receptacle. Chris automatically stopped his hand — and the body of the module continued forward, flipping over at the axis where the bar attached to the sides.

There was a thin metal guide protruding from the rear of the C-6, to help align the electrical plugs. The swinging end dug hard into the tough but thin material of the spacesuit. Chris felt a sharp jolt, gasped in pain, and looked down. A stream of air burst from the suit, fabric and flesh ripped.

Pete had heard Chris' involuntary gasp of surprise and hurt, and demanded, *"What's wrong?"*

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"Nothing!" Chris said quickly. "It just surprised me when it came out."

Hastily Chris zipped open the belt pouch and pulled out the new module. The flood of light from both Baby and Child showed him how to align the C-6, and he inserted it into the receptacle and slid it slowly but firmly in. Near the bottom he met a resistance. Chris shook the pull bar gently, until the thin guide entered its slot, and then pressed hard; he felt the module come to a firm stop after traveling another inch.

Chris turned the Saf-Loks back into position and knew the C-6 was correctly installed when they slipped easily into place.

"The red light is off, Chris," the jubilant voice of Pete Schroder said in his ear. "Now secure the outer panel and hurry back."

"Right," Chris acknowledged, reaching instead for his air supply control. He took it off automatic and moved it to maximum flow. In just the moment it had taken to exchange the modules he had started to grow dizzy from lack of oxygen.

Chris swung the outer panel back in place and reached for its fasteners. He was having to breathe deeply, pumping his lungs as hard as they could work. In spite of this the dizziness increased; the air presure in his suit was very low. His fingers seemed slow and terribly thick and clumsy.

At last it was done. Chris rose from his crouching position, aware he was on the verge of unconsciousness. He was on his feet only because of the magnetic shoes and a lack of gravity to drag him down. But there was something he had to say first, and it was terribly important...he remembered and said aloud, "Captain Jackson! I've got a problem. If I don't make it back inside — start your engines and get out of here! I'm looking at the gas cloud from Baby now...it's coming toward us like a huge sea of flame, with billows of rolling fire...half the heavens are burning... it's — terrible and terrifying, and yet so beautiful...I see you're turning the ship...good..."

"*Chris!* Chris, what's the matter?" the strong, imperative voice of Pete Schroder sounded in his ear.

Chris managed to say, "It's... my suit, Pete. Got a tear...losing air, can't breathe..."

"Chris, listen to me! How big a tear? Can you hold a hand over it, slow the flow enough to build up internal pressure? Try it!"

Chris pressed his right palm against the hole. It seemed to help a little. He raised a left hand that had no strength and clamped it across the right one. The flow of air was cut in half.

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"Come on, Chris! We've got to start the engines. Hurry!" Pete's voice lashed him into motion.

But hurry was impossible; he was barely holding onto his senses. Chris breathed deeply for a moment and finally found some blessed oxygen. Anoxia was a curious phenomenon; he knew his breathing was better only because his vision improved.

Chris took a first clumsy step, but the exertion brought dizziness swirling around his mind again. He lifted the other foot, breathing in great panting gasps, hands locked hard against his chest. His vision was dimming, and darkness gathered like encroaching shadows.

Chris walked on, step after awkward step, his lungs working like bellows. He was staggering through hovering black clouds.

And then as if by magic the airlock was suddenly there, its heavy round door gaping wide.

Chris stopped, breathed deeply, and his vision cleared. With sharpened senses came an acute awareness of how near he had been to unconsciousness, to weakened hands falling away from the rend in his suit, and to death. The strength generated by the dogged hours of exercise had saved him.

Turning, Chris deliberately took a final look at the towering cloud of fire from Baby, the expanding magnificence of fiery splendor that was Child. He realized this was the most supernally beautiful view he was ever likely to see.

And somehow he had to capture this experience in words.

Chris turned and entered the airlock.

"That rather exciting finale should make your report a true thriller, Chris," Bernie said a week later. They were sitting in the observation room. The *Sagan* had slipped into real space a few minutes earlier, but only the navigator was taking readings. There was nothing for the astronomers to do on the way home

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except analyze the vast amount of data they had accumulated. They seemed to enjoy it, which was more than Chris could say for his poem. The subject seemed too large for his grasp.

There was a sound of boots on the spiral stairs, and a moment later Captain Jackson entered. His right wrist was in a cast, but the sharp face had lightened to its normal grayish hue. He and Chris had exchanged only a few words since leaving Baby.

The captain glanced briefly through the window and turned to Chris. He extended his good hand. "I think it's about time I faced up to the facts and apologized for calling you useless. You did a fine job outside. My congratulations."

Chris had been wondering when he would hear those words and was ready. "Thanks, captain," he said, shaking somewhat awkwardly with his left hand. "But you were right. No genuine spacer would have let that module swing the way I did and cut a suit. I didn't allow for the zero gravity effect and almost got us killed. I'm going to file a report that I was inadequately prepared and suggest more intensive training for future civilians on spaceships."

For the first time in more than a year Chris saw a genuine smile on their captain's rugged features. But Jackson only said, "And how is the poem going?"

Chris sighed and told him.

"Then let's discuss it over a cup of stimcaf," the officer said. "Now it happens that I write a little poetry myself."

Chris sighed again, but this time to himself.

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